PATTERNS OF POWER · THE AMERICA SERIES

The Warrant They Wrote for Themselves

How Several Ruling Classes of Englishmen Built a Treaty for Their Own Protection and Armed Everyone They Meant to Exclude, 1607–2026

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Preface

This study is the companion to the England volume, and it traces the same machinery in a sharper and faster form on the other side of the Atlantic. Its first correction to the familiar story is the one everything else depends on: there was no single people called "the Americans," and no single ruling class that founded the United States. There were several distinct ruling classes, grown up in different places on different economic foundations, each with its own assembly, its own militia, its own system of labour — and each holding, with complete conviction, that its members were Englishmen, entitled to the full inherited rights of Englishmen, as much as any man in London.

There was the tobacco gentry of the Chesapeake, governing through the House of Burgesses, which met first in 1619 and whose opening act was to set a price for tobacco — a parliament of planters legislating for the planters' crop. It rested on a hunger for land that no soil-exhausting staple could ever satisfy, and on a slavery that the planters' own assembly hardened, statute by statute, into a lifelong and hereditary caste. There was the rice colony of South Carolina, a transplant of the Barbados sugar islands onto the mainland, the most absolute slave society in English America, governed under a constitution drafted by the philosopher John Locke himself as secretary to its proprietors — the same Locke whose words that men are by nature free and equal would later arm the Revolution, and whose pen had set down, in his own hand, that every freeman of Carolina should have absolute power over his slaves. And there was the merchant north of New England and the middle colonies, founded by religious dissenters who governed themselves through covenants and town meetings, atop a society of broad small property, its merchant class grown rich in the gap between the imperial trade laws and their lax enforcement — which is to say, on smuggling the Crown had not troubled to stop.

These were three interests, not one, and they ran together only when an outside pressure happened to bear on all three at once. That pressure came after Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War, when a Crown deep in debt moved to tax its colonies, enforce the trade laws against the smugglers, and fence in the western land the planters craved — and each measure struck a different faction precisely where it lived. The stamp tax fell on the documents the merchants and lawyers lived by; the line drawn along the mountains blocked the planters' expansion; the enforcement of the trade laws struck at the smugglers' fortunes. The three ruling classes, each running the logic of its own threatened position, converged on resistance and broke from Britain as Englishmen claiming an English inheritance. One contingency is worth marking at the outset: a stronger Britain that kept these colonies might, within two generations, have abolished their slavery by imperial statute as it abolished slavery in its sugar islands — so that the very independence remembered as the birth of liberty also placed the fate of the enslaved in the hands of the masters rather than an empire turning against them.

Having broken, and having watched their first loose confederation fail to protect their common interests — until a rising of debtors in Massachusetts, Shays' Rebellion, frightened the propertied into action — the three ruling classes sat down and built the strong government they needed and feared. The Constitution that resulted is best read not as the testament of a single people but as a treaty negotiated among three interests, and its clauses can be read off faction by faction: the commerce and contract and supremacy clauses the merchants required; the three-fifths, slave-trade, fugitive-slave, and insurrection clauses by which the planters secured their human property, every one of them written without the word "slavery" appearing; and a Bill of Rights, demanded as the price of ratification, whose universal protections of the person ran back through the whole English inheritance — and whose Second Amendment carried, on a strong if contested reading, the slave states' need to keep the armed militias that patrolled and controlled their slaves.

Into this treaty, and into the Declaration before it, the founders wrote universal words — that all men are created equal, that no person shall be deprived of liberty without due process, the people — which they meant to apply only to themselves and their sort, and could not keep inside the line they drew. For the line lived in their intentions, and the words said all men. Lodged in documents the nation came to hold nearly sacred, the words slipped the line and became the fixed material from which later factions, and the very people the founders had excluded, drew warrants the founders had built the documents to deny. The study follows that firing across two and a half centuries: against slavery, answered by a civil war in which the North, with the South's representatives gone from the chamber, passed at last the whole developmental program the slave power had blocked; into the Constitution itself in the war amendments, fired to their height and then hollowed out within a generation when a disputed election was settled in a back-room bargain and the freed people were left, as Frederick Douglass said, to their old masters; into the demolition of segregation a century later, when the Cold War contest for the world's loyalty gave the ruling class a new reason to enforce the long-dead words; and then hollowed out a second time. The common man's gains — real every time they were delivered — proved twice over to be the contingent byproducts of elite quarrels, resting on no law of progress, and reversible when the alignment that delivered them shifted.

The study ends, as the live politics of 2026 demand, on the soberest note: that what was won by accident can be lost, because the protections rest on no law of progress but only on the continuing alignment of the interests they serve, and the present is a moment when that alignment has come apart. The tone throughout is structural, not moral or partisan — neither celebrating the arrangement nor condemning it, neither romanticising the liberties nor sneering at them, but trying to see how the machine actually worked, and to take seriously the suffering it cost along the way: the enslaved, the dispossessed native nations, the workers left outside the bargains, the people the universal words were written to exclude.

A Note on This Collaboration

The framework in these pages, and the line of thought it traces, are Thomas J. Bryan's: the governing insight that durable rule rests on managed belief over a floor of force; that change is driven by ruling elites fighting one another rather than by the common man rising; that factions write their victories into the universal, legitimating language their age makes binding; and that those written words then outrun their authors, firing across centuries in directions never intended. The research, the historical reconstruction, and the writing are the work of Claude (Anthropic), directed and shaped throughout by Bryan's framework and his reading of how it bears on each period. The result is a genuine collaboration: his architecture and insight, carried out in Claude's prose and scholarship. Neither half would be what it is without the other.

The Argument in Seven Parts

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I. Three Governing Classes *1607–1776*

Several separate ruling classes grow up in British America — a tobacco gentry with its own parliament and its self-made law of hereditary slavery, a Barbadian slave colony framed by John Locke's own pen, and a merchant north of covenants and smuggling — each believing itself as English as any Londoner, and their separate interests happen to point the same way when the pressure after 1763 threatens all three at once.

II. The Treaty Among the Three *1776–1791*

Having won independence and watched the loose Confederation fail until a debtors' rising frightened them into action, the three ruling classes build the strong government they need and fear, and write into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights each faction's defence of its own position — the merchants' commerce clauses, the planters' unnamed slavery clauses, the Second Amendment's slave-militia term — in universal words that will not stay inside the line they drew.

III. The Fence and the Fracture *1791–1861*

The ruling classes fight on under new party names; the common white man is taken inside the fence of citizenship while the free black man is shut out harder, the two a single movement; Jackson's democracy widens the vote for white men on the back of native dispossession; the slave power grows on cotton rather than withering; and the founding words are fired both ways — claimed by the slave power and by the abolitionists alike — until the treaty can no longer hold and the question passes to force.

IV. The Words Fired, and Withdrawn *1861–1900*

The Black Codes are the South's first answer to abolition; the South's absence lets the North pass its whole blocked program; the war fires the founders' words into the Constitution itself in the amendments that abolish slavery and enfranchise the freed people — the highest firing of the whole story — and then the same northern ruling class, its position shifted by a disputed election settled over dinner, withdraws the force that made the words real and lets them be hollowed out within a generation while the Court declares it all state business.

V. The Second Great Bargain *1892–1945*

Industrial crisis and depression force real gains to the common man as the cheapest way to save the arrangement — and the New Deal repeats the founding's pattern, buying the southern ruling class's consent by writing the exclusion of the black agricultural and domestic worker into the very laws that secure the white industrial one, in race-neutral words that name no race.

VI. The Words Fired Again *1945–2008*

The Cold War contest for the loyalty of the decolonising world shifts the ruling class's position enough to fire the long-dead Reconstruction words at last; a heroic movement seizes them and real gains follow; and then a long restructuring hollows them out again while leaving the words in place — the reversibility of the common man's gains demonstrated a second time, on the same words, a century apart.

VII. The Live Case *2008–2026*

The long hollowing, the strains of a restructured economy, and the fracturing of the old political order bring the arrangement to an unsettled and dangerous present — traced not to predict its outcome but to make the mechanism visible in events still underway, and to close on the unromantic defence of the constraints four centuries of quarrels and fired words left standing: real, better than the alternatives, and losable.

PART I

THREE GOVERNING CLASSES

How several separate ruling classes grew up in British America — a tobacco gentry with its own parliament, a slave colony framed by a constitution drafted by John Locke, and a merchant north of covenant towns — each holding itself as English as any Londoner, and how their separate interests happened to point the same way in 1776 — 1607–1776

A Note on Method and Intent

This study is the companion to the England Series, and it traces the same machine, in a sharper and faster form, on the other side of the Atlantic. Its central correction to the usual story is made in this first part: there was no single thing called "the colonists." There were several distinct ruling classes, grown up in different places on different economic bases, each with its own assembly, its own militia, its own system of labour, and each holding, with complete conviction, the same belief — that its members were Englishmen, entitled to the full inherited rights of Englishmen, as much as any man in London.

The argument is structural, not moral, and it speaks in the language of tendency rather than of law. It does not claim the founders were villains or that American liberty is a fraud. The liberties were real, and most of what the common man eventually gained from them was unintended by the men who wrote the words. Where it reconstructs what a planter or a merchant was thinking, it assumes he was solving the problem in front of him by the lights of his own position, not serving a future he could not see; and it sets aside, as unknowable, the question of what he privately believed about the universal words he used. The point of seeing the colonies as three ruling classes rather than one people is that it makes the founding intelligible: the United States was not a people declaring itself, but several governing classes whose separate calculations happened, after 1763, to converge — and whose later quarrel, when their interests diverged again over the slavery that divided their economic bases, would have to be settled in a civil war.

One thing to carry from the first page to the last. Nothing in this account moves because the common man pushed it. The things that change in this story are the calculations of the men at the top. When the arrangement opens to let more people in, it opens because someone with power has decided that opening it serves him; when it closes again, it closes for the same kind of reason. That is not cynicism. It is the discipline the whole study keeps: to watch the logic of the ruling class, because that is the thing that actually moved.

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I. Why There Was No Single "America"

The story of the American founding is usually told as the awakening of a single people — "the Americans," "the colonists" — to their rights, their grievances, and at last their nationhood. The trouble with that story is not that it is false at every point but that it hides the thing which actually explains both the Revolution and the civil war that followed it within a single lifetime. There was no American people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There were several separate societies strung along a thousand miles of coast, founded at different times by different sorts of Englishmen for different purposes, resting on different economies, and governing themselves through different institutions. They had more contact and more quarrel with London than with one another. A tobacco planter in tidewater Virginia and a shipping merchant in Boston were both subjects of the same king and both thought of themselves as thoroughly English, but they lived in worlds as different as any two provinces of an empire, and their interests ran together only when an outside pressure happened to bear on all of them at once.

What they shared was not a nationality in the modern sense but an inheritance. Each was a transplanted fragment of England, carrying the English habit of the representative assembly, the English common law, the English language of the rights and liberties of free-born subjects, and the English memory — already centuries deep, as the England Series traced from Runnymede forward — that even the Crown was under the law, and that no man could be taxed except by his own consent. Each of these ruling classes had built, on its own ground, a small working model of the English arrangement: a propertied few at the top, governing through an assembly that claimed the powers of a parliament, holding the labour below it by some mixture of belief, law, and force. To understand the founding you have to see these arrangements one at a time, because the Constitution that eventually bound them together was a treaty negotiated among them — and you cannot read a treaty without first knowing the parties.

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II. The Tobacco Gentry of the Chesapeake

The oldest of these ruling classes grew up around the tobacco economy of Virginia and Maryland, and it shows the English inheritance at work from the very first.

Virginia began as a private commercial venture, a company colony that nearly died in its opening years and was saved by a single crop: tobacco, which Europe craved and which grew well in the Chesapeake soil. Tobacco made fortunes, and tobacco shaped everything about the society that rose to produce it. It exhausted the land quickly, so a planter always needed more ground, which set the colony on a permanent hunger for territory and a permanent collision with the native peoples who held it. It demanded heavy, unceasing field labour, supplied first by indentured English servants and then, increasingly across the century, by enslaved Africans. And it rewarded those who could command large

tracts and large labour forces, so that a gentry of substantial planters rose to the top of Virginia society, modelling itself consciously on the English country gentry it had left behind.

That gentry governed itself, from very early, through an institution it regarded as its birthright. In the summer of 1619, in the wooden church at Jamestown, the first elected representative assembly in English America met — the body that became the House of Burgesses — and the symbolism of its very first piece of business is almost too neat to be believed: it set a minimum price for the sale of tobacco. The planters' parliament's opening act was to legislate in the interest of the planters' crop. They did this because they took it entirely for granted that Englishmen, wherever they settled, carried with them the right to be governed by their own elected representatives and to consent to the laws and the taxes that bound them — the right Englishmen traced to Magna Carta and had been pressing against their own kings for four hundred years. When James I, who disliked the thing, moved to suppress the assembly, the Virginians simply went on meeting. By the eighteenth century the House of Burgesses thought of itself frankly as a parliament in miniature, and its members — men of the names later ages would learn, Washington and Jefferson and Mason and Henry — as the lawful governors of their own commonwealth.

Two features of this ruling class would matter enormously later, and both must be named plainly, because both were *made* and neither was given. The first is the land hunger, which a soil-exhausting crop and a growing planter population guaranteed, and which would set the Chesapeake gentry against any authority — the native nations first, and after 1763 the British Crown itself — that stood between it and the west.

The second is slavery, and the exact way it hardened, because the way it hardened is the clearest early proof that these arrangements were written rather than inherited. The Africans who arrived at Jamestown in 1619 entered a society that did not yet have a settled law of slavery; their status was ambiguous, closer at first to the indentured servitude of the English poor, and some early arrivals worked out their terms and became free, even propertied, men. Across the middle of the century the Virginia assembly — the planters legislating in their own interest, statute by statute — closed that ambiguity and built racial slavery into law. In 1662 it enacted that a child's condition would follow the condition of the mother, not the father, so that the children a master fathered on an enslaved woman were born his property and his slaves multiplied of themselves. In 1667 it declared that baptism into the Christian faith did not make an enslaved person free, severing the old idea that a Christian could not hold a Christian in bondage. In 1669 it provided that a master who killed a slave in the course of correcting him committed no felony, since no man would destroy his own estate on purpose — putting the enslaved, in law, below the protection that covered every other person's life. And in 1705 it gathered these scattered acts into a comprehensive slave code that fixed the whole system: bondage lifelong, hereditary through the mother, and divided by race so that African slavery and English liberty became opposite and permanent castes. None of this was handed down from England. It was built, here, by the planters' own assembly, for the

plain reason that a labour force owned for life and breeding its own replacements was worth more than servants who served their terms and walked away free.

The fragility under the whole arrangement showed itself in 1676, in Bacon's Rebellion, when a faction of frontier planters and landless former servants — hungry for native land and enraged at a royal governor who would not give them a free hand to seize it — rose, burned Jamestown, and briefly overthrew the colony's government before the rising was put down. The lasting lesson the gentry drew was not from the fighting but from the alliance: poor whites and enslaved and indentured blacks had made common cause across the line that was supposed to divide them. The gentry's answer, worked out over the following decades, was to widen the privileges of race — to give the poor white man a set of legal advantages and a caste to stand above, so that he would bind himself to the order rather than to the men in bondage beside him. The hardening of slavery and the manufacture of a common white identity above it were, in part, the same project: the deliberate management, by the men at the top, of the loyalties of the men below. The poor white man's small gains were real. They were also a thing the gentry handed him for a reason of the gentry's own.

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III. The Barbadian Slave Colony and Its Philosopher's Constitution

Further south a second and harsher ruling class grew up, and its origin is the single most revealing fact in the whole colonial story for what it shows about the founders' inheritance.

South Carolina was not founded directly from England. It was founded, in large part, as an offshoot of Barbados — the small Caribbean sugar island that England had turned into the most ruthlessly efficient slave society in its empire, where a tiny planter class worked masses of enslaved Africans to death on the cane and grew enormously rich doing it. By the later seventeenth century Barbados was running short of land, and its surplus planters and younger sons looked for somewhere to reproduce the system that had made them. They found it in Carolina, and they carried with them not only their capital but their whole model of society: great plantations, a small dominant planter class, and a labour force of enslaved Africans held in the most absolute bondage the English world knew. South Carolina was, in effect, a slave island transplanted onto the mainland, and it brought the island's brutal ratios and brutal assumptions ashore with it.

The colony's frame of government makes that inheritance explicit in a way nothing else in the American story does. The Lords Proprietors who owned Carolina commissioned a constitution for it — the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina of 1669 — and the secretary who drafted and revised it, portions of which survive in his own hand, was John Locke. This is the same John Locke whose argument that men are by nature free and equal would, a century later, be reached for to justify the American Revolution and would sound through the Declaration of Independence. And what Locke's pen set down for Carolina, in the document's most notorious article, was this: that every freeman of Carolina was to

have "absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever." The phrase "absolute power and authority" was, in the manuscript, strengthened in Locke's own hand. The philosopher whose universal words would arm the fight for liberty had, decades before, written into law the absolute power of the master over the enslaved.

Hold this without either excusing it or collapsing into easy denunciation, because it is the whole pattern compressed into a single life. Locke, solving the problem in front of him — drafting a workable frame for a proprietary slave colony whose owners profited from the African trade and whom he served — wrote the language his position required, the language of absolute masterly and proprietary power. Locke, a quarter of a century later, solving a different problem — justifying the replacement of one English king by another and demolishing the theory of divine-right monarchy — wrote the language *that* problem required, the universal language of natural freedom and equality. Both sets of words were tools fashioned for particular fights. The first built, in Carolina, exactly the slave society its authors intended. The second escaped its author entirely and armed people he never imagined. There is no contradiction here to be resolved, only the mechanism showing itself plainly: men write the language their position calls for, and which words later outrun their authors depends not on the authors' intentions but on which words happen to be general enough to be claimed by others. "All men are free and equal" can be turned against any inequality on earth. "Absolute power over his negro slaves" can only ever confirm the master. This is the first lesson the study will repeat until it is impossible to miss: the words are written for one purpose, and their later life depends on their shape, not their author's wish.

The Carolina ruling class that grew up under this frame became the most uncompromising slave power on the mainland — the colony where the enslaved soon outnumbered the free, where the whole apparatus of law and force existed nakedly to hold them down. Its position would make it, at the founding and again in 1860, the most absolute defender of slavery among all the American ruling classes: the faction whose price for any union whatsoever was the security of its human property.

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IV. The Merchant North and Its Covenants

The third ruling class grew up in New England and the middle colonies, and it rested on a wholly different base — not a single staple crop worked by bound labour, but trade, shipping, fishing, small farming, and the dense web of Atlantic commerce that tied the northern ports to the wider world.

New England had been founded by a different sort of Englishman for a different reason — by religious dissenters seeking to build a godly community on their own terms, who came in families and congregations rather than as servants on plantations. Their founding instrument was the covenant. The Mayflower Compact of 1620, in which the Pilgrims agreed among themselves to "covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic" and to submit to laws of their own making, was the first of many such agreements in which a community of settlers bound itself, by mutual consent, to a

government it had constituted for itself. Out of this grew the New England town meeting, in which the free men of a town gathered to govern their own local affairs directly — a habit of self-government even more participatory, for those inside the circle, than the planters' assemblies to the south. The northern colonies were societies of comparatively widespread small property: a broad class of farmers, artisans, and traders, governing through assemblies and town meetings a far larger proportion of the population than the narrow gentry of the south ever admitted.

At the top of this society sat a merchant class — the shipowners and traders of Boston, Providence, New York, and Philadelphia — whose wealth came from carrying goods across the Atlantic and around the empire. And here the fact that mattered for the founding is how that wealth was made. Much of the northern merchants' prosperity ran directly against the British Navigation Acts, the laws that required colonial commerce to move through British hands and to pay British duties. The merchants smuggled — traded with the French and Dutch islands, ran molasses and rum and goods past the customs houses — on a very large scale, and the British authorities, for decades, mostly let them, because strict enforcement was more trouble and expense than it was worth. A whole northern fortune-making system had grown up in the gap between the letter of the imperial trade laws and their lax enforcement. When, after 1763, Britain decided to enforce those laws and collect those duties in earnest, it was striking directly at the foundation of the northern merchant class's wealth.

The northern ruling class was not innocent of slavery, and the framework does not pretend it was. Northern merchants financed and crewed slave ships, grew rich on the trade, and sold the enslaved south; northern shippers carried the sugar and the rum the slave economies produced; and slavery existed, in smaller numbers, in the northern colonies themselves. The difference between the sections was never that the north was free of slavery and the south built on it. The difference was that the northern ruling class's wealth did not principally rest on holding masses of enslaved people on its own ground, while the southern ruling classes' wealth did — and that difference in economic base, not any difference in virtue, is what would eventually set their interests against each other.

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V. Three Arrangements, One Inheritance

Step back and set the three ruling classes side by side, because their likeness and their difference together explain everything that follows.

They were alike in their inheritance. Each was a transplanted fragment of England that had built its own working version of the English arrangement — a propertied few governing through a representative assembly that claimed the powers of a parliament, resting on the English common law, justifying itself in the English language of the rights and liberties of free-born subjects, and carrying the centuries-deep English memory that the ruler is under the law and that taxation requires the consent of the governed. Every one of these ruling classes thought of itself as fully English and of its assembly as the local

Parliament, with the same right to consent to its taxes and to govern its own internal affairs. This shared inheritance is what gave them a common language when the time came to resist London, and it is why, when they broke, they reached not for some new revolutionary doctrine but for the oldest English claim of all: that they were being denied the rights of Englishmen.

They were different in their base, and the differences were the seeds of the later war. The Chesapeake gentry rested on tobacco, on land hunger, and on a slavery it had hardened into hereditary law by its own statutes. The Carolina planters rested on rice and on the most absolute slave system on the mainland, transplanted from a sugar island and framed by a philosopher's pen. The northern merchants rested on Atlantic trade, much of it run against the imperial laws, atop a society of broad small property and self-governing towns. These were not three expressions of one interest. They were three different interests, housed under one crown — and, left to themselves, they might never have combined at all. What combined them was a pressure from outside that bore on all three at once.

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VI. The Pressure That Made Them One

That pressure came after 1763, and it is the hinge of the whole founding, because it is the moment three separate ruling classes' separate calculations converged on one answer.

Britain emerged from the long and enormously expensive Seven Years' War — which in America cleared the French from the interior of the continent — victorious and deeply in debt, the national debt having nearly doubled, from roughly seventy-five to roughly a hundred and thirty million pounds, in the course of the fighting. The British government concluded, reasonably enough from its own position, that the colonies defended at such cost should help pay for that defence and for the garrisons now needed to hold the conquered territory. So Britain did several things, and each happened to strike one or more of the colonial ruling classes precisely where it lived.

It moved to enforce the trade laws and collect the customs duties the northern merchants had spent generations evading — striking at the very foundation of the northern merchant fortune. It imposed new taxes levied directly on the colonies by a Parliament in which the colonies sent no members — most provocatively the Stamp Act of 1765, which required a revenue stamp on printed and legal documents of every kind: deeds, contracts, newspapers, pamphlets, court papers, licences, even playing cards and college diplomas — so that the tax fell with particular weight on exactly the most articulate and organised colonists, the merchants whose business ran on paper and the lawyers who drew it. And it tried, with the Proclamation of 1763, to halt the colonists' expansion across the Appalachians, to keep the peace with the native peoples and avoid costly frontier wars — striking directly at the land hunger of the Chesapeake gentry and of every land speculator who looked west, the great Virginians among them, Washington prominent, who had invested heavily in western tracts they were now forbidden to develop.

See how each measure hit a specific interest. The trade enforcement hit the northern merchants. The stamp tax hit the merchants and the lawyers and the printers — the men most able to make an argument and to spread it. The western line hit the southern planters and the speculators. And the new taxes, levied by a Parliament the colonies had no part in, struck at the one thing all three ruling classes held most sacred in their shared inheritance: the right of free-born Englishmen not to be taxed but by their own consent, through their own representatives. Britain had managed, without meaning to, to threaten all three colonial ruling classes at once, and to threaten them in the precise terms of the inheritance they all shared.

The convergence was immediate, and it spoke at once in the inherited language. The Virginia House of Burgesses was first. In late May 1765 a new member attending his first session — Patrick Henry, a young Piedmont lawyer who was no part of the established tidewater elite — rose before a thin, half-empty chamber of fewer than forty members and moved a set of resolutions against the Stamp Act. The first of them claimed that the colony's first settlers had brought with them and transmitted to their posterity "all the Priviledges, Franchises, and Immunities" ever enjoyed by "the People of Great Britain" — the inheritance of 1215 and 1689, fired now across the Atlantic against Parliament itself. The fifth and most radical resolution declared that the colony's own General Assembly had the "only and exclusive Right and Power to lay Taxes" on its inhabitants, and that any attempt to lodge that power elsewhere tended "to destroy British as well as American Freedom." The fifth resolution passed by a single vote and was rescinded the very next day, when the senior men returned and the cautious majority reasserted itself. But it did not matter that the assembly walked it back, because newspapers up and down the coast printed all the resolutions — including ones Henry had never formally introduced — as though every one had passed, and the radical position was loose in the world. Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts complained that "nothing extravagant appeared in the papers till an account was received of the Virginia Resolves." The words were in circulation, and words in circulation cannot be recalled.

In October 1765 came the first formal coordination among the three factions: the Stamp Act Congress, twenty-seven delegates from nine colonies gathered in New York — ten of them lawyers, ten merchants, the rest planters and landowners, the three colonial ruling classes assembled in miniature, the lawyers carrying the constitutional inheritance, the merchants the commerce of the north, the planters the slave economies of the south. Their Declaration of Rights and Grievances claimed for the colonists "all the inherent rights and liberties" of British subjects and named taxation by consent as "the distinguishing characteristic of British freedom," a right that had "never been forfeited or yielded up." Parliament answered with the Declaratory Act of 1766, which repealed the hated Stamp Act with one hand while asserting, with the other, its authority to bind the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." The minimum necessary concession; the maximum assertion of principle. The two positions could not be reconciled, and everyone who looked closely could see it.

This is the convergence that made a revolution, and it is worth being exact about what it was and was not. None of the three ruling classes needed to coordinate a plan or to share a common vision of the

future. Each, running the logic of its own threatened position, arrived independently at the same conclusion — that London had become a danger to its property, its self-government, and its rights — and each reached for the same weapon, the only weapon their shared inheritance made binding: the claim that they were Englishmen being denied the rights of Englishmen, taxed without their consent, governed without their say. When forty barons converged on Runnymede in 1215, they did so because forty men in like positions, facing the same king, ran the same arithmetic. When thirteen colonies converged on resistance after 1765, the same thing happened on a larger scale: separate ruling classes in like positions, facing the same imperial pressure, each reached the same answer — and their convergence looked, from outside, like a single people awakening, when it was in fact three distinct interests pushed, for the moment, into alignment.

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VII. A Note on What Slavery's Fate Hung On

One contingency deserves marking here, because it bears on everything the rest of the study will trace, and because it is the sharpest possible illustration that none of these outcomes was foreordained.

Slavery in British America was not, in the middle of the eighteenth century, a settled and permanent feature of the world that nothing could have altered. It rested, like every arrangement in this study, on a particular alignment of power and interest — and that alignment included the awkward fact that the imperial authority above the colonies was, for its own reasons, turning increasingly cool toward the institution. Within a few decades of the American break, Britain would move to abolish first the slave trade and then slavery itself across its empire, driven by a mixture of religious agitation, shifting economic interest, and metropolitan politics. A society of slaveholders that remained inside the British Empire would have been subject to that current, exactly as the British Caribbean colonies were when their slaves were emancipated by act of the British Parliament in the 1830s — over the bitter objection of the planters, who could not stop it, because they were not sovereign.

The American slaveholders, by breaking away and founding their own sovereign union in which they held great power, removed themselves from that current and secured their human property against the one authority that might have curtailed it from above. This is not to say that the Revolution was made in order to protect slavery; the convergence of 1776 was far broader than that, and most of the revolutionaries, north and south, were not thinking primarily of slavery's long-term security. It is to say, more precisely, that one consequence of independence was to place the fate of American slavery in the hands of the American ruling classes themselves rather than in the hands of an imperial power that was turning against it — and that this made the institution far more secure, and its eventual destruction far bloodier, than it might otherwise have been. Had the break not come, or had it failed, the enslaved people of the American south might have been freed by British statute in the 1830s rather than by civil war in the 1860s. The mechanism holds no brief for either outcome. It records only that the fate of

millions hung on which sovereignty held the power to decide, and that the Revolution settled that question in favour of the masters.

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VIII. What This Part Establishes

The thing to carry out of this first part is the correction it makes to the founding story, because the rest of the study depends on it.

There was no single American people awakening to its rights. There were three distinct ruling classes — the tobacco gentry of the Chesapeake, with its parliament, its land hunger, and its self-made law of hereditary slavery; the rice planters of Carolina, transplanted from a slave island, governing under a frame whose absolute masterly power was set down by the very philosopher whose universal words would later arm the fight for freedom; and the merchant class of the north, grown rich in the gap between the imperial trade laws and their lax enforcement, atop a society of broad small property and self-governing towns. Each was a working version of the English arrangement; each held itself fully English; each held its land and its labour by its own mixture of belief, law, and force. They were three interests, not one, and they ran together only when the imperial pressure after 1763 happened to threaten all three at once, in the precise terms of the English inheritance they all shared.

That convergence is the key to both the Revolution and the war that followed it within a lifetime. Because the union of 1776 was a convergence of separate interests and not the expression of a single people, it could hold only so long as those interests pointed the same way — and when they diverged again, over the very slavery that divided their economic bases, the union would have to be renegotiated, and then, when renegotiation failed, fought over. The founders, breaking as Englishmen claiming an English inheritance, reached into the inherited record for the warrant of consent and of rights, and wrote that warrant in the universal language that was the only binding currency available to them. They wrote it for themselves. That it would later be claimed by everyone they had written it to exclude is the engine of everything that comes after — and it was no part of their design.

The next part follows them from the break to the document in which the three ruling classes, having won their independence and watched their first loose union fail to protect their common interests — until a debtors' rising in Massachusetts frightened them into action — sat down and negotiated the treaty among themselves that we call the Constitution, and wrote into it, clause by clause, each faction's defence of its own position, in words large enough to be claimed, later, by everyone those words had been drawn narrowly around.

PART II

THE TREATY AMONG THE THREE

How the three ruling classes, having won independence and watched their loose union fail until a debtors' rising frightened them into action, built the strong government they needed and feared, and wrote into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights each faction's defence of its own position — in universal words that would not stay inside the line they drew, 1776–1791

A Note on Method and Intent

This part reads the Constitution not as the inspired charter of a single people but as what it structurally was: a negotiated treaty among the three ruling classes described in the first part, each coming to the table to protect a specific interest, and each getting written into the document a specific protection for it. The reading is offered clause by clause, faction by faction, because the claim is concrete — that you can point to the parts of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and say which faction each was written to protect, and against what fear. Where a clause's purpose is genuinely contested among historians, as with the Second Amendment, the part says so and holds the strong reading as a strong reading rather than a settled fact, because the discipline of this study is to mark real disputes, not to flatten them. And it sets aside, as unknowable, what any framer privately felt about the universal words he used. What matters is that those words, once written into a document the nation would come to hold sacred, slipped the narrow line their authors drew around whom they were meant for. The reverence Americans came to feel for the Constitution is itself part of the mechanism: a text held sacred is a text whose words bind, and can be turned, far beyond their authors' intent.

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I. Where the Last Part Left Off

The three ruling classes — the tobacco gentry of the Chesapeake, the rice-and-slave planters of Carolina, the merchants of the north — had converged after 1763, each running the logic of its own threatened position, on resistance to a Britain that had begun to tax them without their consent, enforce the trade laws against the smugglers, and fence in the land the planters craved. They broke as Englishmen claiming an English inheritance, and when they came to write their justification they reached for the universal language that inheritance made binding. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 put it in the sentence that would outrun its authors further than any other in the American story — that all men are created equal, endowed with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — a sharpened

descendant of Locke's claim that men are by nature free and equal, fired now at a king rather than written for a slave colony. The men who signed it meant it as a weapon against George III and as a statement of the rights of the propertied colonists breaking away. Most of them owned slaves or profited from slavery, and none imagined the sentence applying to the people they held in bondage. But the words said *all men*, and the words were now in the founding record, where intent cannot follow to police them.

This part follows what happened after the break: how the three ruling classes, having won the war, first built a weak union that failed to protect their interests, then — frightened by a rising of debtors that showed them exactly what they had to fear — built the strong government they needed, and wrote into it each faction's defence of its own position. The thing to watch is the document being assembled as a treaty: every major provision a term negotiated among the three interests, every term protecting somebody's specific stake, the whole written in the universal language that was the only binding currency, in words that would not stay where their authors put them.

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II. The Loose Union and Why It Failed

When the colonies declared independence they did not create a nation in the modern sense. They created an alliance of thirteen sovereign states, and the first frame of government they wrote — the Articles of Confederation, drafted in 1776–77 and ratified in 1781 — reflected exactly that: a loose league in which the central Congress could request but not compel, could not tax, could not regulate trade, and could not enforce its decisions on the states or their citizens. This was not an oversight. It was what the three ruling classes wanted at first, because each was jealous of its own self-government and suspicious of any central power that might, like the British Parliament they had just thrown off, reach over their heads to tax or rule them without their consent. Each faction, getting away from London, retreated to its own statehouse and gave the centre the least that wartime necessity required. A weak centre was a centre that could not threaten any of them.

But a weak centre soon proved unable to protect their common interests either. It could not pay the war debts, which alarmed the creditors — the merchants and financiers holding the new nation's paper. It could not stop the states erecting trade barriers against one another, which hurt the merchants whose business crossed state lines. It could not present a united front in commerce or diplomacy, which weakened all of them against the European powers. And it could not, when it came to it, guarantee order inside the states. The men of property across all three sections began to feel that the loose union was failing at the one thing a government exists to do for a ruling class — protect property and keep order. But it took a specific shock to turn that unease into action.

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III. Shays' Rising and the Fear That Made the Constitution

That shock came in the winter of 1786–87, in western Massachusetts, and it is the clearest single illustration in the American story of how a ruling class is moved to act not by abstract argument but by fear for its position.

The farmers of the Massachusetts backcountry were caught in a vise of debt and taxes. The state, controlled by eastern creditors, demanded taxes in hard money the cash-poor farmers could not get, and the courts were foreclosing on farms and jailing debtors. Petitions having failed, the farmers did what their English and colonial forebears had always done: they took direct action, gathering in armed bands, many of them veterans of the Revolution, and shutting down the county courts to stop the foreclosures. Led by a former Continental Army captain named Daniel Shays, they marched in January 1787 on the federal arsenal at Springfield. The rising was put down by a privately financed militia raised by the merchants of Boston — not by any national force, because there was none — but the spectacle terrified the propertied class up and down the seaboard. Here was exactly what they feared: the common men, the debtors, the people below, taking up arms against the courts and the creditors, with a central government too weak to do anything about it.

The private letters the rising produced among the governing class show the fear in their own hands. Washington wrote to Henry Lee that "commotions of this sort, like snow-balls, gather strength as they roll," and to Henry Knox that he felt the disorders more than he could express, because "there are combustibles in every State, which a spark may set fire to." The metaphor was a soldier's: this was the kind of fire that spread rather than burning out, and the Articles gave the central government no bucket to throw on it. From Paris, Jefferson — comfortably distant from the courthouses being shut — struck the celebrated contrary note, writing to Madison that "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing," the tree of liberty wanting its periodic refreshment. The difference between the men on the spot and the man across the ocean is itself instructive: Washington, who would have to deal with the next rising, saw a danger to be extinguished; Jefferson, who would not, saw a tonic. The framework privileges neither man's sincerity. What it marks is what the rising demonstrated and what it did to the calculation at the top.

What it demonstrated was precise: under the Articles, the property-holding class could not be protected against an organised rising from below. The Congress could not raise an army; the federal government stood a spectator while a merchant-funded militia did the work. Had the Boston merchants been poorer or less organised, or had the Shaysites stormed the armoury more skilfully, the outcome might have gone the other way. The governing class did not need to have the philosophical conversation about whether a stronger centre was desirable. It needed only the position conversation about whether the present arrangement could protect its property, and the answer was visibly no. The Confederation Congress approved the call for a convention on 21 February 1787 — three weeks after the attack on the Springfield arsenal. The Constitution was conceived in fright.

Hold what this means about the document's origin. The Constitution was written by men of property, frightened by a rising of debtors, to build a government strong enough to protect property and keep order across three ruling classes whose cooperation that protection required. It was, in its origin, the propertied closing ranks. And because the three ruling classes had different interests, the strong government they built had to protect each of them from the others as well as all of them from the people below — which is precisely why the document reads as a treaty, with terms for each party.

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IV. The Treaty, Clause by Clause

Fifty-five delegates from twelve states — Rhode Island refused to send any — gathered at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia from late May 1787, and conducted their business in secret through the summer heat with the windows closed against eavesdroppers. Within weeks Madison's Virginia Plan had displaced the Articles as the working document, and it was understood that the convention was building a new government rather than patching the old one. Read the Constitution they produced as the negotiated settlement among three interests, and its structure becomes legible in a way the single-people story can never make it. Each faction came to Philadelphia needing specific protections; each got them written in.

The first quarrel was among the ruling classes themselves, not between them and the people below, and it produced the shape of the government. Madison's Virginia Plan proposed representation proportional to population in both houses of the legislature — which would have given Virginia, the most populous state, the largest voice, and served Virginia's interest as plainly as it served Madison's republican theory. The small states would not have it: equal voting in the old Confederation Congress had given Delaware the same weight as Virginia, and proportional representation in both chambers would sink them into permanent minority. William Paterson's New Jersey Plan answered with equal representation for every state. The deadlock held through June and into July, until Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut proposed the split that broke it — proportional representation in the House, equal representation in the Senate. The Great Compromise passed on 16 July 1787 by five states to four: a margin of a single state. Madison, who thought equal state representation in the Senate logically indefensible, was devastated, lost the fight, and then turned around and defended the Senate in the Federalist Papers, because his position now required defending what the coalition had produced. The institution that one lost vote created — the chamber that gives a tiny state the same two votes as a vast one, and that the slave states would lean on for a century — is a monument to position logic settling a question that principle could not.

With the frame settled, the terms for each faction went in. The merchants and creditors of the north needed a government that could do what the Confederation could not: tax, pay the debt, regulate commerce, secure property, and make a single national market. They got it. The Constitution gave the central government the power to tax, to borrow, to coin money, and — the clause that would build the

national economy — to regulate interstate and foreign commerce, sweeping away the state trade barriers and creating the continental market the merchants needed. It forbade the states to impair the obligation of contracts or to issue their own paper money, protecting creditors against exactly the debtor-relief laws Shays' farmers had wanted. It made federal law and treaties the supreme law of the land. For the commercial north, the Constitution was the strong, order-keeping, market-making, contract-enforcing government its position required.

The slaveholding planters of the Chesapeake and the deep South needed the opposite assurance: that the strong new government could never be turned against the institution their wealth rested on. The document gave it to them, and gave it without once using the word *slavery*. The Three-Fifths Clause counted three-fifths of the enslaved — roughly seven hundred thousand people who could not vote and had no voice — toward a state's representation in the House and its votes in the Electoral College, handing the slave states extra national weight in exact proportion to the people they held in bondage, a weight so real it would put slaveholding Virginians in the presidency for most of the early republic. The slave-trade clause forbade Congress to end the Atlantic trade for twenty years, until 1808, protecting the deep South's supply of fresh captives — and Article V forbade even amending that protection before the date, a clause shielding a clause. The Fugitive Slave Clause required that a "person held to Service or Labour" who escaped into another state be delivered up to the claimant, reaching the slaveholder's claim across state lines into the free states. And the provisions empowering the federal government to suppress insurrection and to call out the militia meant the new national force could be turned against a slave revolt — a guarantee the planters, who lived in dread of exactly that, valued above almost anything.

Notice the careful evasion in the language, because it is the mechanism showing itself. The Constitution protects slavery thoroughly and never names it. It says "three fifths of all other Persons," "such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit," "person held to Service or Labour" — circumlocutions that let the document do the slaveholders' work while keeping the word, and the thing, out of the universal text. The framers who disliked slavery wanted it unnamed so the charter would not be stained; the framers who defended slavery were content to have it protected in substance. The result was a document whose universal language — "We the People," the guarantees of liberty — sat directly atop concrete protections for human bondage, with the bondage left unnamed. That gap, between the universal words above and the unnamed thing below, is exactly the space into which later factions would drive their wedge.

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V. The Bill of Rights as a Second Round of Terms

The Constitution as drafted carried no bill of rights, and the fight over ratification forced one — which produced a second round of written protections, readable, like the first, against the interests that demanded them.

Ratification required nine of the thirteen states, and it was not a foregone thing. The opponents — the Anti-Federalists, who feared the strong new centre would swallow the states and the liberties of the people — fought hard. "Brutus," writing in New York, warned that the taxing power joined to the Supremacy Clause would let the federal government absorb every state function into one consolidated mass. George Mason of Virginia, who had drafted the Virginia Declaration of Rights that Jefferson drew on for the Declaration of Independence, refused to sign the Constitution at all, citing the absence of a bill of rights and the twenty-year shield over the slave trade. Patrick Henry thundered against the document through the Virginia ratifying convention, predicting federal tyranny. Delaware, smallest of the states and given by the Senate everything its position wanted, ratified first and unanimously on 7 December 1787. New Hampshire was the decisive ninth on 21 June 1788. Virginia followed four days later by the close margin of 89 to 79 — an outcome that could have gone the other way under slightly different conditions. Rhode Island, which had boycotted Philadelphia altogether, held out until 29 May 1790, by which time the new government had been running for a year.

The price of the doubtful states' assent was a written set of guarantees against the new government's power. Madison, who had at first opposed a bill of rights — arguing that the government's limited enumerated powers made one unnecessary and that listing some rights might imply the surrender of those left off — changed his position under the pressure of the ratification fight and the live threat that the Anti-Federalists would force a second convention to undo Philadelphia's work. He introduced twelve amendments in the first Congress; the Senate trimmed them to ten; and they were ratified on 15 December 1791. The first ten amendments were the Anti-Federalist price: freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly; protection against unreasonable search; the rights of the accused — trial by jury, due process, no cruel and unusual punishment — the protections that run straight back through the English inheritance this study has traced, through the Bill of Rights of 1689 and the Petition of Right to Magna Carta's promise that no free man be seized but by the law of the land. These were the universal protections of the person against the state, written by men protecting themselves and their states against a central power they had just built and did not fully trust, in the broad language that was the only binding currency — and, like all such language, written larger than the immediate purpose, to be claimed across the centuries by people the framers had never had in mind.

The Second Amendment deserves particular attention, because its origin shows the treaty's southern term written, on a strong if contested reading, into the Bill of Rights itself. The amendment guarantees the right to keep and bear arms in the frame of "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State." The militias of the southern states were, among their functions, the instrument of slave control — the armed patrols that rode the night-time "beats" to keep the enslaved where they were meant to be, searched the quarters for weapons, and put down the risings the slaveholders dreaded, the kind of rising that had killed scores of whites at Stono in South Carolina in 1739. A number of scholars, Carl Bogus most prominently, have argued that Madison framed the amendment partly to reassure the southern states — Virginia's great slaveholders Patrick Henry and George Mason had raised exactly this alarm at the ratifying convention — that the new federal power over the militia could not be used to

disarm the state militias on which the South relied to hold down its slaves. On this reading the "free State" whose security the militia guaranteed was, for the southern ratifiers, a slave state securing itself against its slaves.

The reading is contested, and the discipline of this study is to say so rather than to pretend the matter closed. Other historians note that the demand for a right to bear arms appeared in northern states with little connection to slavery, that Mason and Henry spoke at least as much of the general danger of a disarmed people under a tyrannical government, and that no delegate stated the slavery connection in plain words. The framework does not need to settle it. What holds either way is the structural point: the southern ruling class came to ratification needing assurance that the strong new government could not disarm the instruments by which it held its position, slave patrols among them; that assurance helped secure southern ratification; and the amendment, whatever the full mix of its purposes, was written in the universal language of the right of the people to bear arms — language that, once written, would be claimed across the centuries by Americans of every kind for purposes having nothing to do with the militias of 1791. Here, as everywhere, the universal words outran the particular bind that produced them.

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VI. The Line They Drew, and Why the Words Would Not Keep It

The framers drew, in their own minds, a narrow line around whom their universal words were meant for. "We the People" meant the propertied free men of the three ruling classes and those they chose to admit to citizenship. "All men are created equal," carried over from the Declaration into the nation's founding creed, was understood by most who wrote and signed it to describe the rights of free men like themselves against a tyrannical government — not the enslaved people they owned, not the native peoples whose land they took, not women, not the propertyless. The protections of the Bill of Rights were meant for citizens as the founders understood citizens. The line was perfectly clear in their heads, and it excluded most of the people living under the document.

But the line was in their heads, not in the words. The words said *all men, the People, no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law*. And once those words were written into documents the new nation came to hold sacred — and Americans came to revere the Constitution and the Declaration with something close to religious veneration, which is exactly what makes a text's words binding and citable far beyond their authors' intent — the words became fixed material that anyone could later take down and turn. The framework has shown this mechanism in England, running across centuries; in America it would run faster and hotter, because the founding documents were more explicitly universal in their language and more deeply venerated than anything in the English record, and because the gap between the universal words and the unnamed bondage beneath them was so glaring that it could not be argued away forever.

The enslaved and their allies would point to "all men are created equal" and ask how it could exclude them. The disenfranchised would point to "We the People" and ask why they were not part of it. The advocates of every shut-out group would point to due process and the equal protection of the laws and ask why those did not cover them. None of these claims could be answered out of the words themselves, because the words did not contain the line — the line lived only in the founders' intent, and intent is not citable the way text is. Once it is written, it is written. The framers had written, into the most venerated documents the nation possessed, universal language that they meant narrowly and could not keep narrow. The treaty among three ruling classes, drawn to protect their three positions, had been written in words large enough to arm everyone those positions excluded.

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VII. What This Part Establishes

The Constitution was a treaty among the three ruling classes, written by frightened men of property after a debtors' rising showed them the cost of a weak centre, and it can be read as a treaty: the merchants' need for a taxing, commerce-regulating, contract-enforcing, order-keeping government written into the commerce and contract and supremacy clauses; the planters' need for security against any federal move on slavery written into the three-fifths, slave-trade, fugitive-slave, and insurrection clauses, all carefully unnamed; and the common protections against the new government's power written, at the states' insistence, into a Bill of Rights whose universal guarantees ran back through the whole English inheritance — and whose Second Amendment carried, on a strong if contested reading, the southern term of the treaty into the heart of the rights themselves.

Hold both spines, because the rest of the study lives on them. The gains written into the document were real and would prove immense: the structure of representative government, the protections of the person, the framework that could later be amended and turned. And they were, in their origin, the self-protections of ruling classes, drawn around a narrow line of intended beneficiaries — written by men who owned slaves and feared debtors, to protect property and keep order, in universal words they meant to apply only to themselves and their sort. What makes the American case the sharpest illustration of the whole mechanism is the size of the gap between the universal words and the narrow line: a document that protected human bondage in unnamed clauses while proclaiming that all men are created equal could not, in the end, keep its own words inside the line its authors drew.

And the contingency must be held as firmly as the gap. Nothing whatever guaranteed that the words would later be fired against the exclusions rather than buried under them. They were written; where, and whether, they would be fired was not decided in 1791. The next part will show them sitting loaded for two full generations while the slave power grew stronger rather than weaker and the line around whiteness hardened rather than dissolved. The words were in the record. What anyone would do with them depended, then as always, not on the words but on whose interest, at a given moment, the words could be made to serve.

The next part follows the loaded words through the early republic and toward the fracture. The three ruling classes fought on under new party names; the common white man was taken inside the fence of citizenship and the vote while others were shut out harder than before; the slave power, far from withering, grew and reached for more territory; and the universal words of the founding sat in the venerated record, claimed by a rising movement against slavery and denied by a slave power that read the same Constitution as its own shield — until the treaty of 1787 could no longer hold the diverging interests, and the question passed, as it does when belief and bargain fail, to force.

PART III

THE FENCE AND THE FRACTURE

How the three ruling classes fought on under new party names, took the common white man inside the fence of citizenship while shutting others out harder, watched the slave power grow rather than wither, and drifted toward the fracture that force alone could settle, 1791–1861

A Note on Method and Intent

This part carries the story from the ratification of the Constitution to the eve of the Civil War — the long stretch in which the loaded words of the founding sat in the venerated record while the country they bound grew, expanded, and pulled apart. It watches two things at once. Above, the ruling classes fight on through new party names over tariffs, banks, and above all the westward extension of slavery, their quarrel sharpening as the sections' interests diverge. Below, the franchise widens to take in the common white man — and the same movement that brings him inside the fence of citizenship shuts the free black man out of it harder than before, so that the broadening of democracy and the hardening of racial caste are one process and not two. The argument is structural and uses the language of tendency. It treats the drift to war not as a morality play but as the characteristic outcome when a treaty among ruling classes can no longer contain their diverging interests, and the question passes, as it does when belief and bargain fail, to force. It sets aside as unknowable what any man privately felt, and holds throughout that the gains of this period were real, unevenly distributed, and contingent on alignments that were visibly coming apart.

The reader should carry one thing especially through this part, because it is the period most often told as the triumph of the people. The widening of democracy here was real, and it was not won by the common man's energy from below. It was extended to him from above, by parties competing for his vote, on terms the parties set — and it was extended to him as a white man, with a caste fixed beneath him as part of the bargain. What moved was the calculation of the men running the parties. The common white man was the object of that calculation, not its author.

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I. Where the Last Part Left Off

The Constitution had bound the three ruling classes into one federal government — a treaty written by frightened men of property to protect property and keep order, with terms for each faction: the

commerce and contract powers the merchants needed, the unnamed slavery protections the planters required, the protections of the person the states had demanded as a bill of rights. Into that document, and into the Declaration that preceded it, the founders had written universal language — *all men are created equal*, *the people*, *no person to be deprived of liberty without due process* — that they meant narrowly and could not keep narrow, because the line they drew around whom the words were for lived in their intentions and not in the words themselves.

This part follows what happened across the next seventy years, as the bound nation grew and the loaded words waited. The thing to watch is the divergence. In 1787 the three ruling classes' interests had been pushed into alignment by the external pressure of Britain. With Britain gone, the alignment loosened, and the underlying difference in their economic bases — northern commerce and free labour, southern slavery — began to pull their interests apart. The federal government became the arena in which that divergence was fought out, party against party, section against section, over the one question on which the sections' interests were most directly opposed: whether slavery would spread into the new territories of the west. And underneath the sectional quarrel, the citizenship of the nation was being redefined in a way that took in the common white man and shut out everyone else.

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II. The Parties as the Ruling Classes in New Clothes

The political parties that formed in the early republic were not, at bottom, anything new. They were the ruling-class interests of the founding, organised for the contest over the federal government the Constitution had created.

The first division pitted the faction around Hamilton — the northern commercial and financial interest, wanting a strong central government, a national bank, a funded debt, tariffs to protect manufactures, and close ties to commercial Britain — against the faction around Jefferson and Madison, resting heavily on the southern planters and the agrarian interest, wanting a weaker central government, no national bank, low tariffs, and sympathy with revolutionary France. These were the merchant north and the planter south, contending through the new federal machinery over whose vision of the national economy would prevail. The names would shift across the decades — Federalists and Republicans, then Democrats and Whigs, then Democrats and the new Republicans — but beneath the shifting labels the same underlying interests fought on, and increasingly the deepest line of division was sectional: the slave south against the free-labour north, with the west as the prize.

What made the western territories the central battleground was the logic of the treaty itself. The Constitution had given the slave states extra weight through the three-fifths counting of their slaves, which meant that the balance of power in the federal government turned on how many slave states and how many free states there were. Every new state shifted the balance. If the west filled with free states, the north would come to dominate the federal government and might, the planters feared, eventually

move against slavery itself. If it filled with slave states, the slave power would hold or extend its grip. So the extension of slavery into the territories was not a side issue; it was *the* issue, because it decided who would control the federal machinery and through it the fate of the institution on which the southern ruling class rested. The quarrels that punctuated the period were all the same quarrel. The Missouri Compromise of 6 March 1820, brokered by Henry Clay, admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free one to keep the Senate even, and drew a line across the Louisiana Purchase at 36°30' — slavery permitted below it, forbidden above. The aging Jefferson, watching from Monticello, saw what the bargain only postponed; he wrote to John Holmes that the crisis had come to him "like a fire bell in the night," that he held it "at once as the knell of the Union," and that the compromise was "a reprieve only, not a final sentence." He saw the fracture more clearly in 1820 than most of the founders had in 1787 — though he did not say, and his formation would not let him see, that the universal words he had written were themselves the mechanism by which the fracture would come. The crises that followed — over the lands taken from Mexico, the Compromise of 1850, the bloody fight over Kansas — were that same reprieve being bought again and again, at a steeper price each time.

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III. The Common White Man Comes Inside the Fence

While the ruling classes fought over the territories, the citizenship of the nation was being widened in a way that is central to this account, because it shows the common man receiving a real gain and an excluded group being shut out harder in the very same movement — and it shows, plainly, whose decision the widening was.

In the founding era the vote had been tied to property: a man had to own a certain amount of land or wealth to vote, on the old English theory that only the propertied had the independence and the stake to be trusted with a voice. Across the first three decades of the nineteenth century, state by state, that property qualification fell away, until by 1830 virtually every white adult man could vote in most states. This was a genuine widening of political power. But it did not come as the gift of a principle, and it did not come because the common man forced it. It came as a move in the parties' competition: each party, needing to win elections, had reason to enlarge the electorate with voters it hoped would favour it, and the common white man's vote was courted because it was useful to the men courting it.

The figure who put his name on the era was Andrew Jackson, and he is the clearest case of the thing this part exists to show. Jackson's election in 1828 was the first presidential victory by a man who explicitly claimed to stand for the common man against the established eastern governing class — against Hamilton's financial establishment and its embodiment, the Second Bank of the United States. His coalition was the three-faction structure extended downward into the population: southern planters who hated the Bank and the northeastern financiers it served, western farmers and land speculators who wanted cheap credit and open western land, northern urban workers and artisans who resented the commercial elite. Its language was thoroughly democratic — the people against the aristocracy, the

many against the privileged few. But the people in question were specifically white men. Jacksonian democracy moved the fence of citizenship inward, opening it to a far broader class of white men, while leaving its racial and indigenous exclusions exactly where they were, and in places driving them deeper. The "rise of the common man" was, with precision, the rise of the common *white* man, and it was the Democratic faction's electoral strategy before it was anyone's gift.

Two things Jackson did show what the democratic language sat on top of. The first was Indian Removal. The Indian Removal Act of 28 May 1830 authorised the forced uprooting of the Five Civilized Tribes — Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole — from their lands in the southeastern states to territory west of the Mississippi, to open that land for white settlement and white cotton. When the Cherokee, who had done everything the white man's law asked and pursued their claim through the white man's courts, won — the Supreme Court ruling in *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832 that Georgia had no authority over Cherokee land — Jackson simply declined to enforce the decision, which the Court had no power to enforce for itself, and the removal went forward anyway. The Cherokee removal of 1838–39 drove some sixteen thousand people west along the road they called the Trail Where They Cried; about four thousand died of cold, hunger, and disease along it. Here the loaded words of the founding were fired and *missed*: a people inside the country invoked the law and won a judgment, and the arrangement refused to enforce a judgment for a people it had placed outside the line. The franchise widening and the dispossession were the same politics seen from two sides. The white farmer's expanding democracy and the native nation's destruction were paid for with the same coin.

The second was the Bank War. Jackson's veto in July 1832 of the recharter of the Second Bank of the United States was cast, in a message drafted by his lieutenant Amos Kendall, in the ringing democratic vocabulary of the people against a privileged monopoly that enriched the few at the expense of the many. The principled language was real enough as language. But the calculation underneath was factional: the Bank served the northeastern financial interest that had aligned against Jackson's coalition, and destroying it would weaken that interest and scatter its power among state banks where Jackson's men held more sway. When the Whigs Clay and Webster engineered the early recharter, gambling that Jackson would either sign it and lose his western followers or veto it and lose the northeast, he vetoed, lost the northeast, and won the election anyway on western and southern majorities. Both things were true at once — the democratic creed and the factional move — and the framework's whole method is to hold them both in view without letting either hide the other. The common white man heard the language of his own elevation. What moved was the position logic of the men using it.

Now look at what happened to the free black man in the same decades, because it is the identical process seen from the underside. As the property qualification fell away for white men, the racial qualification hardened against black men. States that had let free black men of property vote now stripped them of it; New York in 1821 abolished the property requirement for white men while keeping it for black men alone; after 1820, with the lone exception of Maine, no new state admitted black men to the vote, and several that had allowed it took it away. The widening of democracy for white men and the exclusion of

black men from it were not two developments but one. The fence was being redrawn to take in all white men and shut out all black men, and the very phrase that justified bringing the poor white man inside — *all men are created equal* — was, in practice, narrowed to mean all white men.

This is the framework's claim about how the common man is brought into an arrangement, made as vivid as it ever gets. The poor white man was handed a real stake — the vote, the proclaimed equality, the dignity of full citizenship — and the handing of it bound him to the arrangement and to the ruling classes that governed it. And part of what made his inclusion hold together, part of what the gift consisted of, was that there was now a caste permanently beneath him: the black man, free or enslaved, locked out of the citizenship the white man had just been brought into. The lesson the Virginia gentry had drawn after Bacon's Rebellion a century and a half before — bind the poorer whites to the order by the privileges of race — was now written into the suffrage of the republic. The common white man's gain was real. It was also, in part, purchased with the deepened exclusion of the black man, and with the dispossession of the native nations, and the three cannot be separated in the telling.

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IV. The Slave Power Grows

The hardest correction this part makes to the comforting story is here, and it must be stated flatly: across the decades after the founding, slavery did not wither. It grew, strengthened, and reached for more.

Many of the founders, slaveholders among them, had spoken of slavery as a dying institution, an inherited evil that would fade as the economy changed; some defended the Constitution's unnamed clauses as the terms on which a doomed thing was tolerated for a season. A machine destroyed that expectation. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, patented in March 1794, mechanised the one labour-intensive bottleneck that had kept short-staple cotton unprofitable: before it, a worker could clean about a pound of cotton fibre from its seed in a day; with it, about fifty. The effect on the slave economy was total. The American cotton crop, around 1.5 million pounds in 1790, reached roughly 35 million pounds by 1800, 160 million by 1820, and some 2.3 billion pounds by 1860 — about two-thirds of all the cotton grown on earth, and around sixty percent of all American exports by value. Far from dying, slavery became the foundation of the most dynamic export economy in the world. The enslaved population, multiplied by the hereditary bondage the planters' assemblies had built into law, climbed toward four million, and the market value of the enslaved as property came to exceed the value of all the factories and railroads of the north combined. The slave power was not a relic fading toward extinction. It was a rising, expanding, immensely wealthy interest that needed ever more land for cotton and ever more political power to protect its human property.

And it used the federal government, which the three-fifths advantage helped it dominate, to protect and extend itself. For most of the period the slaveholding interest, or politicians dependent on it, held the presidency, the Court, and enough of Congress to block any move against slavery and to push its

protection outward. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 turned the federal government and the citizens of the free states into the catchers of escaped slaves — its commissioners paid more for a ruling that returned a man to bondage than for one that freed him — compelling northerners into active participation in the system. And in 1857 the slave power reached its high-water mark in the Dred Scott decision, in which a Court dominated by southern sympathies held, in Chief Justice Taney's words that became infamous, that a black man had "no rights which the white man was bound to respect," that no black person, free or enslaved, could be a citizen, and — further — that Congress had no power to bar slavery from the territories at all, so that the entire northern programme of containing slavery was unconstitutional. The slave power was not on the defensive. It was advancing, turning the very Constitution that had been written as a treaty among ruling classes into a claim that the federal government could never touch slavery anywhere and that the whole country was open to it.

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V. The Same Words, Fired Both Ways

Here the loaded words of the founding show their double edge, because the same Constitution and the same Declaration were now being fired by both sides, in opposite directions, each faction reading the venerated text as its own warrant.

The slave power read the Constitution as shield and sword. The unnamed clauses protected slavery; the three-fifths clause gave it power; the fugitive-slave clause reached into the free states; and Dred Scott now held that the Constitution carried slavery into the territories and denied black men any standing to claim its protections. On this reading the founding document was a proslavery compact and the slaveholders its faithful keepers, defending the Constitution as written against northern agitators who would betray it. They were not wrong that the document protected slavery. The clauses were really there.

But the rising movement against slavery read the same record the other way, reaching past the unnamed clauses to the universal words above them. The abolitionists and the new antislavery politics pointed to the Declaration's *all men are created equal* and asked how a nation founded on that proposition could hold millions in bondage; they pointed to the Constitution's own universal language, its guarantees of liberty, its careful silence on the word slavery, and argued that the document was not, in its true meaning, a proslavery compact at all — that its framers had hidden slavery in shame and expected it to die, and that its principles, rightly read, condemned it. Frederick Douglass, who had once denounced the Constitution as a covenant with bondage, came to argue the opposite: that read in the light of the Declaration's principles, it was a charter that could be turned against slavery. When Dred Scott declared the black man had no rights the white man was bound to respect, Douglass answered not by abandoning the founding words but by claiming them — insisting that the rights of black Americans flowed from a higher law than Taney's court, from the self-evident truths the nation had written into its own creed, and that the Supreme Court was neither the only nor the final authority. The excluded were doing exactly

what this study describes everywhere: taking the universal words the founders had written for themselves and firing them at the exclusions the founders had built.

Notice that the words themselves could not settle the dispute, because the words were genuinely double. The Constitution really did protect slavery in its clauses and really did proclaim liberty in its universal language; the Declaration really did say all men are created equal, and its authors really had meant it narrowly. Each side held a true reading. The text could not, by itself, decide between them, because the line that would have decided — the founders' intention to exclude the enslaved — was not in the text but only in the history, and intent is not citable the way text is. When a venerated text is read in opposite ways by factions whose underlying interests have become irreconcilable, the text cannot resolve what the interests will not. Which reading would prevail was never, in the end, going to be settled by argument about the words. It was going to be settled the way such questions are settled when belief and bargain fail: by force.

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VI. The Treaty Cannot Hold

The drift to war was the treaty of 1787 failing to contain interests that had diverged past the point any compromise could bridge, and the framework reads it not as a tragedy that better men might have averted but as the characteristic outcome when a bargain among ruling classes can no longer hold their opposed positions together.

The compromises had worked, for a time, because they were genuine bargains in which each side got enough to prefer the union to the alternative. But each bought less time than the last, because the underlying divergence kept widening. The cotton economy made the slave power richer and more committed to expansion; the free-labour north grew faster in population and wealth and less willing to see the western territories closed to free farmers and opened to plantation slavery; and the three-fifths advantage that had let the slave power dominate the federal government became less and less tolerable to a northern majority that resented being governed, as it saw it, by a slaveholding minority amplified by the counting of people who could not themselves vote. The election of 1860, in which a northern antislavery party captured the presidency without a single southern electoral vote, showed the slave power that it had finally lost control of the federal government it had long dominated — that the machinery the Constitution had built could now be held by a section hostile to slavery's expansion. And the southern ruling class, rather than accept a federal government it no longer controlled, chose to leave: to dissolve the treaty and found a new union explicitly built on slavery.

How explicitly is worth marking, because it shows the loaded words doing their work even in the act of repudiation. When the seceding states wrote their own constitution, they stripped out the founders' careful universal language and wrote slavery in by name, protecting it in plain words the framers of 1787 had been at pains to avoid. And the Confederacy's vice-president, Alexander Stephens, declared in

the spring of 1861 that the new government rested upon "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man," that slavery was its "natural and normal condition" — that this was its very "corner-stone." The men who left could no longer live with the universal words of the founding, because those words had begun, at last, to be fired against them; so they threw the words out and said the quiet thing aloud. That is the clearest measure of how far the founding language had travelled from its authors' intent: the slaveholders found they could keep their institution only by repudiating the creed the slaveholders of 1776 had written.

The framework's reading of secession is precise. The southern ruling class had entered the union of 1787 because, in that moment, its interests aligned with the others against a common external pressure. It left in 1860–61 because its interests had diverged so far from the northern ruling class's, and it had so thoroughly lost control of the shared government, that the union no longer served its position and a separate sovereignty served it better. This was not the common man's decision; the secession conventions were dominated by the planter class, and many southern whites had little stake in slavery and were drawn into a war fought, at bottom, for the slaveholders' property. It was a ruling class concluding that the treaty had stopped protecting its interest and acting, as ruling classes do, to protect that interest — this time by breaking the union rather than binding it. And once a ruling class with its own territory, government, and army decides to leave, and the other side decides to compel it to stay, the question has passed beyond belief and bargain to the floor beneath them. Force would decide who ruled the continent and whether slavery would stand, exactly as force decides when belief fails and the question is finally put.

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VII. What This Part Establishes

Across the seventy years from ratification to secession, the three ruling classes fought on through new party names over the federal government the Constitution had built, and their quarrel narrowed to the one question on which their interests were most opposed — the extension of slavery into the west, which would decide who controlled the government and the fate of the institution the southern ruling class rested on.

In the same decades the common white man was brought inside the fence of full citizenship — the vote extended to him as a move in the parties' competition for his support, with Jackson's coalition making the strategy explicit and giving it a creed. It was a real gain, and it was handed up from above rather than wrested from below, and it was purchased in part by the hardening exclusion of the free black man and the violent dispossession of the native nations, so that the broadening of democracy and the deepening of racial caste were a single process. The slave power, far from withering, grew on the back of the cotton economy into a rising, expanding interest that used its constitutional advantages to dominate the federal government and push its protection ever further, to the high-water mark of Dred Scott. And the loaded words of the founding were fired both ways — claimed by the slave power as its constitutional shield,

claimed by the antislavery movement and by men like Douglass as the warrant of a higher equality the nation had written into its own creed — with the text itself unable to settle a dispute its universal words and its unnamed clauses had built into it.

Hold both spines. The gains of the period were real: a genuine widening of political participation, a growing antislavery movement that learned to fire the founding words against bondage, the survival and growth of a constitutional order. And they were contingent and uneven to the point of contradiction: the same years that brought the white workingman inside brought a deepened exclusion of the black man and the destruction of the native nations, and the institution of slavery grew stronger, not weaker, under the Constitution that proclaimed liberty. Nothing in the mechanism guaranteed the universal words would be fired against slavery rather than buried beneath the clauses that protected it; for seventy years the slave power read the same documents as its own warrant and grew on the reading. What finally fired the founding words into the Constitution itself was not the inner logic of the words but a war.

The next part is the pivot on which the whole study turns. The war fires the founders' universal words into the Constitution itself, in three amendments that abolish slavery, make the freed people citizens, and guarantee them the vote — the highest firing in the entire American story. And then the same northern ruling class that wrote those words, its position shifted by a disputed election settled in a back-room bargain and by the pull of its own economic interest, withdraws the force that alone made the words real, and lets the freedman's new rights be hollowed out within a single generation while the words themselves stay in the text. It is the clearest proof the study offers that the common man's gains are real when delivered, contingent on the alignment that delivers them, and reversible the moment that alignment shifts.

PART IV

THE WORDS FIRED, AND WITHDRAWN

How the war fired the founders' universal words into the Constitution itself, how the northern ruling class passed its whole program while the South was absent, and how the same class let the freedman's new rights be hollowed out within a generation once its position no longer required them, 1861–1900

A Note on Method and Intent

This is the pivot on which the whole study turns, and it is built to demonstrate the one thing the comforting story of American progress most needs to deny: that the common man's gains, even when fired into the Constitution itself in the plainest universal language, are real only while the ruling-class alignment that delivers them holds, and are withdrawn when that alignment shifts. The war fires the founders' words into the supreme law in three amendments that abolish slavery, make the freed people citizens, and guarantee them the vote — the highest firing in the entire American story. And then, within a single generation, the same northern ruling class that wrote those words allows them to be hollowed out, its position changed by a disputed election settled in a back-room bargain and by the pull of its own economic interest, until the freedman is left, in the words of the man who saw it most clearly, naked to his enemies.

The argument is structural and speaks in the language of tendency. It takes the suffering of this period — the war's dead, the freed people abandoned to terror, the native peoples dispossessed — with the seriousness it demands, and it sets aside no part of it to make the mechanism look clean. The mechanism is not clean. It is only how the thing worked. And one feature of how it worked deserves stating in advance, because it is the heart of the matter. The southern ruling class's purpose never changed across these decades: from the moment slavery fell, it set about rebuilding as much of slavery as the law would allow, without the name. What changed was whether the federal government had a reason to stop it. While the northern ruling class needed the freed man's vote and the South's submission, it stopped the rebuilding and wrote the freed man's rights into the Constitution. When it no longer needed them, it let the rebuilding go forward and let the Court bless it. The freed man's fate tracked, with terrible exactness, not his own effort or his enemies' wickedness alone, but the shifting calculation of the men in the north who had the power to enforce the words or to withdraw.

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I. Where the Last Part Left Off

The treaty of 1787 had failed. The three ruling classes' interests had diverged past the point any compromise could bridge; the slave power had lost control of the federal government it had long dominated; and rather than accept a government it no longer ruled, the southern ruling class had left the union to found a sovereignty built explicitly on slavery. The northern ruling class chose to compel it back. The question of who would rule the continent, and whether slavery would stand, had passed beyond belief and bargain to the floor beneath them, where it goes when belief and bargain fail: to force.

This part is about what force decided, and about the deeper lesson in what came after. The war fired the founders' loaded words into the Constitution itself, further than they had ever travelled. And then the alignment that had fired them shifted, and the same ruling class that wrote the words let them be hollowed out. The thing to watch is the two motions together — the firing and the withdrawal — because only the two together show the framework's hardest truth: that the gain was real, that it was reversible, and that the reversal came not from the enemies of the freed people alone but from the changed interest of the very class that had freed them.

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II. The South's Absence and the Northern Program

Before the amendments there is a less-remembered consequence of secession that shows the mechanism with unusual clarity, and it is worth dwelling on, because it makes the point in miniature before the war makes it in full.

When the southern members left Congress in 1861, they took with them the faction that had blocked the northern commercial program for a generation. For decades the slave power, amplified by its three-fifths advantage and its hold on the Senate, had vetoed the things the northern ruling class wanted: a homestead law to settle the west with free farmers, a transcontinental railroad on a northern route, federal support for colleges, a national banking system, protective tariffs. The South had blocked them because they served the free-labour north and the western farmer rather than the plantation, and because they strengthened exactly the federal government and the free-state bloc the South feared. With the southern veto simply gone from the chamber, the northern ruling class, now in unchallenged control of Congress, passed its entire program in a rush, in the middle of the war.

In 1862 alone the Republican Congress passed the Homestead Act, granting western land to settlers who would farm it; the Pacific Railway Act, subsidising the transcontinental railroad on a northern route with land grants and loans; and the Morrill Act, endowing public colleges with federal land. It created the Department of Agriculture, passed the National Banking Act to build a national currency and banking system, raised the protective tariffs the manufacturers wanted, and enacted the first federal income tax. In the space of a few years the northern ruling class wrote into law the developmental program the South

had blocked since the 1850s — and it could do so precisely because the faction that had opposed it was absent from the room. This is the framework's claim about how legislation actually moves, made vivid: the program did not pass because the country had been persuaded of it, but because one of the contending ruling classes had walked out and left the other in command of the machinery. When a faction leaves the table, the faction that remains writes the rules. Hold that, because it is exactly what will happen again, in reverse, when the war is over and a different group is left with no one at the table to speak for it.

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III. The South's First Answer: The Black Codes

The war ended in the spring of 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery that December, and almost before the ink was dry the southern states, restored to self-government under President Andrew Johnson's lenient plan, gave their first answer to the question of what the freed people were now to be. The answer was a set of state laws, passed across 1865 and 1866, that came to be called the Black Codes — and they are the clearest possible statement of the southern ruling class's purpose, because they were written before anyone had learned to disguise it.

Mississippi went first, in November 1865, and the other states followed within months. The codes granted the freed people a few of the forms of freedom — they could now marry, own some property, make contracts, and sue and be sued in the courts — while building, around those forms, a cage meant to return them to bound labour in everything but name. Two mechanisms did the work, and both are worth seeing exactly, because both would outlive the codes that first stated them.

The first was vagrancy. Mississippi's law declared that any freedman over eighteen found, on the second Monday of January 1866 or after, "with no lawful employment or business" was a vagrant — and a convicted vagrant who could not pay the fine, which ran far higher for a black man than a white, would be hired out to whoever paid it for him, with preference given to his former employer. The same statute made it a crime for a white man to associate with freedmen "on terms of equality." What this did was simple and devastating: it made unemployment itself a crime for a black man, and turned the criminal law into a machine for forcing the freed people back onto the plantations under contracts they could not refuse. A man who left a planter to look for better terms was, by the act of looking, a criminal.

The second was apprenticeship, and it is the mechanism that reached the children. The codes required local officials to report every black or mixed-race minor who was an orphan, or whose parents the court judged unable to support him, so that the court could bind the child out as an "apprentice" to a white employer until adulthood — and the statutes gave the child's former owner the first claim. South Carolina's code let the courts apprentice black children even against their parents' will, to the age of twenty-one for boys and eighteen for girls, and gave the master the right to inflict "moderate" corporal punishment and to recapture an apprentice who ran. In plain terms, a court could declare a freed family's

parents unfit, take their children, and hand those children to the family's former master to work without wages through the whole of their youth. The freed people understood exactly what this was — a child who "belonged to a master," valued for labour, taken from its family at the master's convenience, which was the oldest wound of slavery itself — and they fought it in the only forum open to them, suing in the courts to recover their children, child after child suing for its own freedom.

The Black Codes are the southern ruling class showing its hand. Slavery had been abolished six months before, and the men who had owned the slaves were already rebuilding it — the labour discipline, the bound youth, the master's first claim on the bodies of the people he had formerly owned — and announcing, in the open language of statute, that the freed people were to be governed by a separate law made for them alone. And precisely because they showed their hand, they provoked the response that produced the firing. The Freedmen's Bureau and the military governors struck down the worst of the codes on the spot; and the northern public and the Republican Congress, watching the defeated South set about restoring bondage under new names, drew the conclusion that mere abolition was not enough — that the freed people would need rights written so deep that no state legislature could reach them. The Black Codes are why the Fourteenth Amendment exists.

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IV. The Highest Firing: The War Amendments

The war itself, four years of industrial slaughter that killed more Americans than any war before or since, had decided by force the question the Constitution's words could not: slavery would not stand, and the union would. And in the years that followed, the northern ruling class — its Radical wing pressing for genuine reconstruction, its whole coalition needing to break the slave power for good and to secure the southern black vote that would sustain Republican power for a generation — fired the founders' universal words into the Constitution itself, in three amendments that are the highest firing in the whole American story.

Emancipation had come first as a war measure. Lincoln had freed the slaves of the rebelling states by proclamation in 1863, framed explicitly as a military act against the enemy's labour force; his own letter to Horace Greeley the year before had stated the calculation without disguise — that his paramount object was to save the Union, and that what he did about slavery he did because he believed it helped to save the Union. The moral conviction was real and the war-measure logic was real, both at once, which is the framework's point and not a charge against him. But what began as a measure of war became, when the war was won, a permanent rewriting of the supreme law. The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in December 1865, abolished slavery throughout the United States — "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted," a clause whose buried exception the South would shortly turn into a weapon. The Fourteenth, ratified in 1868, made all persons born in the country citizens — overturning Dred Scott's holding that a black man could never be a citizen — and forbade any state to deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, or to deny any

person the equal protection of the laws, writing the universal language of the founding directly into the Constitution's own text and binding it on the states. The Fifteenth, ratified in 1870, forbade the denial of the vote on grounds of race. The words the barons' descendants had written narrowly, the words Locke had penned for a different purpose and Jefferson had sharpened against a king and the framers had kept carefully unnamed in their slavery clauses — *all men*, *equal protection*, *the people* — were now fired into the Constitution as explicit guarantees to the freed people.

This was the loaded words travelling as far as they would ever travel in America: not read into a venerated text by an outside movement, but written into the supreme law itself, made the formal command of the nation. And for a brief period, backed by federal troops occupying the defeated South, the words were real. Black men voted in large numbers; some two thousand black men held public office across the South — sheriffs, legislators, congressmen, and the first black United States senators, Hiram Revels and Blanche Bruce of Mississippi; the Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction state governments built schools where the enslaved had been forbidden to read, educating well over a hundred thousand black students within a few years; the freed people built churches, acquired land, and began, haltingly, to make a biracial democracy function in states that had been slave societies five years before. The framework does not minimise this. It was a real and radical transformation, the universal words made flesh by force, and for a few years the freedman held rights his enslaved parents could not have imagined. The gain was real.

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V. The Man Who Saw the Danger

Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery to become the age's greatest voice for the freed people, saw exactly what the gain depended on and exactly how it could be lost, and his analysis is the framework's own.

Douglass understood that the words in the Constitution were not self-enforcing — that against the deep and living power of the former masters, the freedman's new rights would hold only if the federal government stood behind them with force. As early as 1865 he argued that emancipation alone would not protect the freed man, because slavery's power lay not only in law but in custom, manners, and the accustomed authority of the master, which law alone could not quickly undo; the freed man, he warned, would be made "the slave of society at large" if he were not given the ballot as a wall of fire for his protection. He saw that the rights written into the Constitution were a promise whose redemption depended on the continuing willingness of the northern ruling class to enforce them against a southern ruling class that had every interest in nullifying them.

And he watched that willingness drain away. As the northern public wearied of occupying the South, as the northern ruling class's attention turned to its railroads and its factories and its own expansion, and as the cost of protecting the freed people came to seem greater than the benefit, the federal commitment

eroded. Douglass named it as it happened. Looking back on the abandonment, he called the so-called emancipation a "stupendous fraud," because the freed people had been handed back to the old master class; he described that class as having taken possession of the very government it had gone to war to destroy, with the Supreme Court deciding nearly every question in favour of the states against the federal power, until the former masters had made themselves masters not only of their former slaves but of the whole situation. He had seen, with terrible clarity, that the words in the Constitution were only as real as the force behind them, and that the force was being withdrawn.

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VI. The Bargain Over Dinner

The withdrawal had a hinge, and it is one of the clearest instances in American history of the common man's fate being settled in a back-room calculation among the powerful, in which his rights were the bargaining chip and a railroad was on the table.

The presidential election of 1876 was disputed. The Democrat Samuel Tilden had won the popular vote and stood one electoral vote short of the presidency; the votes of three southern states still under Republican Reconstruction governments — Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina — were contested, with rival slates submitted, and the whole election hung on them. An electoral commission of eight Republicans and seven Democrats voted, eight to seven on party lines, to award every disputed vote to the Republican Rutherford Hayes. As the crisis dragged toward inauguration with the threat of renewed violence in the air, the men of the two parties met to make the thing safe. On 26 February 1877, five days before the inauguration, Republican allies of Hayes and a group of southern Democrats met at the Wormley Hotel in Washington — a hotel owned, as it happened, by James Wormley, a wealthy black entrepreneur, the ironic setting for the deal that would end black political participation in the South for two generations. The southern Democrats agreed to drop their obstruction and let Hayes take office; in return, the Republicans agreed to withdraw the last federal troops from South Carolina and Louisiana, to appoint a southerner to the cabinet, and to support federal aid for a southern transcontinental railroad, the Texas and Pacific, that would run through the region and develop its economy. Hayes was inaugurated. The troops came out in April. The "Redeemer" governments — the restored white ruling class — took power within weeks.

Look at what was traded, because the framework asks us to see it plainly. The thing the southern ruling class wanted above all was the removal of the federal troops who alone were enforcing the freed people's rights against the resurgent white power of the redeemed states. The things the northern Republicans wanted were the presidency and, woven through the bargaining, the development of the South on terms useful to northern capital, the railroad among them. The rights of the freed people — the vote, the equal protection, the whole apparatus of the war amendments — were not the object either side was fighting for. They were the price the northern side was willing to pay. To secure the presidency and to get on with the business of national economic development, the northern ruling class agreed to

withdraw the force that made the freedman's constitutional rights real, and handed the South back to the local white ruling class to govern as it would. The troops left. The words stayed in the Constitution. And without the force behind them, the words became, for the freed people, a dead letter for the better part of a century.

The precise weight of the Wormley meeting is debated among historians; the federal commitment was already eroding before 1877, and the troops were few. But the structural fact is not in doubt, whatever the role of one hotel dinner: the northern ruling class, its position shifted by the wish to settle a dangerous election and by the pull of its own economic interest toward developing rather than policing the South, withdrew the enforcement that alone had made the war amendments real, and the freed people were left, as Douglass said, to their enemies. The same class that had fired the words into the Constitution let them be hollowed out when its interest no longer required their enforcement. That is the pivot, and it is the single clearest demonstration the study offers of the reversibility spine. Hayes himself, a year later, recorded in his private diary his disgust at the "fraud, intimidation, and violence of the most atrocious character" by which southern whites were now winning elections — and did nothing effective about it, because he was bound by the terms of his own bargain and had no congressional support to break them. The private conscience recorded one thing; the public arrangement required another; and the arrangement won.

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VII. Slavery Without the Name

With the troops gone and the federal government no longer interested, the southern ruling class set about, deliberately and successfully, rebuilding the substance of slavery while keeping inside the letter of the amendments it could not repeal. It did not need to repeal the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. It needed only to build state-law machinery that produced the old results while technically obeying the words — and to be sure that no federal power was pointed at the machinery. Both conditions were met between 1877 and the end of the century, and the result was the reconstruction, by other means, of nearly everything the war had abolished.

The criminal law did the first part of the work, exactly as the Black Codes had begun it, now without anyone to strike it down. The vagrancy statutes remained, and to them was added a dense net of petty offences — breach of a labour contract, "enticing" a worker away from an employer, loitering — written and enforced so that a black man without a labour contract, or one who tried to leave a bad one, was a criminal. And the Thirteenth Amendment had left the door open: it abolished slavery "except as a punishment for crime." Out of that exception grew convict leasing. Black men were arrested on minor or fabricated charges, convicted in summary trials before white judges and all-white juries, and then leased by the state to coal mines, turpentine camps, brickyards, and railroad gangs, which paid the state a fee per head and worked the men under armed guard. The arithmetic was worse than slavery's, and the framework insists on the cold reason why. A slaveowner had owned his slaves and so had a stake in

keeping them alive; a convict-lease operator owned nothing, paid only the lease, and could replace a man who died with another the courts would readily supply — so he had no reason to keep any of them alive. Death rates in the convict-lease camps ran far above anything under slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment had abolished slavery; it had not abolished this, because the men who wrote it had not seen the exception they left in it being turned into a system.

Where the criminal law was not needed, debt did the work. Sharecropping bound the freedman without any crime at all: he rented land from a former slaveholder, bought his seed and tools on credit at the planter's store, and sold his crop through the planter's hands — with the prices set by the creditor, the interest charged by the creditor, and the accounts kept by the creditor, who alone could read the ledger. A man kept in this arithmetic could never get clear of the debt, and a debtor who could not get clear could not leave; he was bound to the land and to the planter's direction by an obligation the labour itself could never discharge. It reproduced much of slavery's substance under the forms of free contract.

And the vote, the wall of fire Douglass had begged for, was put out. The Fifteenth Amendment forbade denying the vote on grounds of race, but it did not forbid literacy tests administered by white registrars with unlimited discretion, poll taxes a sharecropper could never pay, grandfather clauses that waved through any man whose forebears had voted before the war, white primaries that called the only election that mattered a private party affair beyond the Constitution's reach, and registration rules whose complexity could fail any black applicant on the registrar's whim. Mississippi's constitution of 1890, written for the open and stated purpose of disenfranchising black voters while keeping inside the letter of the Fifteenth Amendment, was the template the rest of the South copied. The result is visible in two numbers. Black voter registration in Mississippi fell from roughly a hundred and ninety thousand to about three thousand by 1900. In Louisiana it fell from a hundred and thirty thousand in 1896 to about five thousand by 1900. The amendment's words stayed in the Constitution. The voting they had produced was simply gone — and behind the legal machinery stood the older instrument the codes had always relied on, the terror of the lash and the rope, the epidemic of lynching that rose alongside the new order to keep the freed people where the law was putting them.

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VIII. The Court Says It Is State Business

None of this could have held if the federal courts had read the war amendments to mean what they said. They did not. Across a string of decisions running from the very years of Reconstruction to the end of the century, the Supreme Court read the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments so narrowly that the federal protection they seemed to promise drained out of them — holding, in case after case, that the rights of the freed people were the business of the states, not of the national government, and that the national government therefore could not reach the men who were destroying those rights.

The Court began the work early. In the Slaughterhouse Cases of 1873 — its first reading of the Fourteenth Amendment, and a case brought by white butchers, not freedmen — it held that the amendment's clause protecting the "privileges or immunities" of citizens guarded only the narrow rights a person held by virtue of *national* citizenship, not the broad rights he held as a citizen of his state, which remained, as before, under the states' control. At a stroke the clause that looked like a federal guarantee of citizens' rights against their states was emptied of nearly all its content. Three years later came the decision that mattered most for the freed people. In United States v. Cruikshank in 1876, the Court overturned the federal convictions of men who had taken part in the Colfax Massacre of 1873 — in which a white mob had murdered more than a hundred black men in a Louisiana political dispute. The federal government had prosecuted the killers under the Enforcement Acts passed to break the Klan. The Court set the convictions aside, holding that the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantees of due process and equal protection restrained only *state* action, not the acts of private individuals: if a white mob, rather than the state itself, murdered black citizens and broke up their assemblies, that was a matter for the state to prosecute, and the federal government had no standing to step in. Since the state, run by the men the mob served, would not prosecute, the killing could go on. The amendment written to protect the freed people had been read to mean that no one with the power and the will to protect them was permitted to.

The Court completed the logic in the Civil Rights Cases of 1883, when it struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 — Congress's attempt to bar racial discrimination in inns, theatres, railroads, and other public accommodations. The Fourteenth Amendment, the Court held, reached only the states; it gave Congress no power to forbid discrimination by private businesses and private persons, however systematic. The freed man turned away from every hotel and railway car in the South had, by this reading, suffered no constitutional wrong the nation could remedy. And in 1896 the Court set the capstone in Plessy v. Ferguson. Homer Plessy — a man seven-eighths white but black under Louisiana law — had been chosen by a New Orleans civil-rights committee to test the state's law segregating railway cars, deliberately taking a seat in the white car. The Court ruled, seven to one, that state-enforced separation of the races was consistent with the equal protection of the laws so long as the facilities were nominally equal; if the separation stamped the black man as inferior, Justice Brown wrote for the majority, that was only because the colored race chose to read it that way. Justice John Marshall Harlan alone dissented, and his dissent is the loaded word fired straight at the majority: "Our Constitution is color-blind," he wrote, "and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens," and the thin disguise of equal accommodation would mislead no one and atone for nothing. Harlan was right about what the words meant. He was one against seven, because the political conditions that would have made his reading enforceable did not exist — the troops were gone, the northern ruling class had no interest in the fight, and a lone correct reading of the text, without power behind it, changes nothing. His words would be taken down and fired again, and would win, fifty-eight years later in Brown v. Board of Education — but only when a later alignment of power made the firing pay. In 1896 the same words lost, seven to one.

This is what Douglass meant when he said the Court was deciding every question for the states. The amendments stood untouched in the Constitution. The Court had simply read them to reach nothing and

no one that mattered, and in doing so had declared the whole fate of the freed people to be the business of the states that were destroying them.

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IX. What This Part Establishes

This is the pivot of the whole study, and what it establishes is the reversibility spine in its starkest form.

The war fired the founders' universal words into the Constitution itself — abolished slavery, made the freed people citizens, guaranteed equal protection and the vote — the highest firing in the American story; and for a few years, backed by federal force, the words were real. Black men voted, held office, built schools and churches, held rights their enslaved parents could not have imagined. The gain was real. And then the northern ruling class that had fired the words allowed them to be hollowed out, its position shifted by a disputed election settled in a back-room bargain in which the freedman's rights were the price and a railroad was on the table, and by the pull of its own interest toward developing the South and the West rather than policing them. The troops withdrew; the words stayed in the text; and without the force behind them the words became a dead letter, while the freed people were forced back into a bondage-in-fact — the vagrancy charge and the convict lease, the apprenticed child and the debt that could not be paid, the vote taken by literacy test and poll tax and rope — that the formal guarantees of the Constitution did nothing to prevent and that the Court declared the nation powerless to touch. The southern ruling class's purpose had not changed since 1865; only the northern ruling class's willingness to stop it had. Douglass, who saw it whole, called the emancipation a stupendous fraud and named the freed people as left naked unto their enemies.

The framework must hold, alongside the abandonment of the freed people, what the triumphant northern ruling class did with the program it had passed while the South was gone — because the same expansion the homestead and railroad acts drove was built on another dispossession. The transcontinental railroads and the homestead settlement opened the west by taking it from the native peoples who lived there, and the same federal army that was withdrawn from protecting the freed people in the South was turned, in the same decades, to the conquest and confinement of the Plains nations — the wars, the broken treaties, the destruction of the buffalo economy, the forced removal onto reservations, the deliberate breaking of native cultures. The white farmer who took his hundred and sixty acres under the Homestead Act took land the army had cleared of its native owners. The arrangement gave to some by taking from others, and the universal words of the founding covered the giving and the taking alike.

Hold both spines, because this part exists to hold them at their sharpest. The gains were real when delivered — nothing in the structural reading denies that black Americans held genuine rights and power during the few years the force stood behind the words. And the gains were contingent on the alignment that delivered them and reversible when it shifted — delivered by a ruling class that needed, for the duration of its quarrel with the South, to fire the words, and withdrawn by the same ruling class when

that quarrel was settled and its interest moved on. There is no law of progress here, and the period refutes the idea of one as completely as anything in either volume: the same words, fired to their highest point and written into the supreme law, were emptied of force within a generation by the very class that wrote them. The words remained. What they meant in the lives of the people they named depended, entirely, on whether anyone with power had an interest in enforcing them — and for the better part of a century, no one with power did. That is the lesson the pivot teaches, and the rest of the study is its working-out.

The next part turns to the industrial age and the second great bargain. As the country was remade by industry and convulsed by depression, the ruling class was forced, to save the arrangement itself from the threat of upheaval, to concede real gains to the common man — the regulation of industry, the recognition of labour, the foundations of a welfare state. And the second great bargain repeated the pattern of the first: it bought the consent of one faction by excluding another, writing the southern ruling class's price — the exclusion of the black agricultural and domestic worker — into the very laws that gave the white industrial worker his security.

PART V

THE SECOND GREAT BARGAIN

How industrial crisis and depression forced real gains to the common man as the cheapest way to save the arrangement itself — and how the New Deal repeated the founding's pattern, buying the southern ruling class's consent by writing the exclusion of the black worker into the laws that secured the white one, 1892–1945

A Note on Method and Intent

This part covers the remaking of America by industry and the two great crises — the upheavals of the 1890s and the Great Depression — that forced the ruling class to concede real gains to the common man. The reading is that these gains came, characteristically, not as the fruit of the common man's rising but as the cheapest available way for a frightened ruling class to save the arrangement itself from the threat of something worse. And it argues that the New Deal, the largest such concession in American history, repeated the exact pattern of the founding: it secured the consent of the southern ruling class by writing that class's price — the exclusion of the black agricultural and domestic worker — into the very laws that gave the white industrial worker his new security. The argument is structural and uses the language of tendency. Where the causes of a policy are contested among historians, as with the precise weight of southern racial motive in the New Deal's exclusions, the part marks the dispute rather than flattening it. It holds the gains as real and large, and holds, in the same grip, that they were bought on terms that excluded millions by design or by default, and that they rested on an alignment that would later shift.

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I. Where the Last Part Left Off

The pivot of the last part established the study's hardest lesson: that the common man's gains, even fired into the Constitution itself, are real only while the ruling-class alignment that delivers them holds, and are withdrawn when it shifts. The war amendments had written the founders' universal words into the supreme law; the northern ruling class had then let them be hollowed out, withdrawing the force that made them real once its quarrel with the South was settled and its interest moved on to developing the continent. The freed people were left to their enemies; the West was taken from its native peoples to feed the expansion; and the words remained in the Constitution as words while the reality they promised was destroyed.

This part follows the arrangement into the industrial age, where a new common man — the industrial wage worker, crowded into the factories and cities of a country being remade by steel and oil and the railroad — confronted a new concentration of ruling-class wealth, and where two great crises forced the ruling class to concede. The thing to watch is the mechanism by which the concessions came: not as gifts, and not as the fruit of the workers' rising, which was characteristically crushed, but as the calculated price a frightened ruling class paid to save the arrangement from the upheaval it feared — and, in the largest case, as a bargain that bought one faction's consent by excluding another, exactly as the founding had.

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II. The New Concentration and the Old Crushing

The industrial transformation that remade America after the Civil War produced a concentration of wealth in private hands without precedent in the nation's history — the great trusts and corporations in steel, oil, railroads, and finance, and the men who owned them, whose fortunes and whose command over the lives of working people dwarfed anything the old merchant or planter classes had held. Against them stood a new common man: the industrial wage worker, often a recent immigrant, labouring long hours in dangerous conditions for wages set by employers who held all the cards, crowded into the tenements of the industrial cities, with no security against injury, unemployment, old age, or the next downturn.

When that worker tried to better his position by the direct means available to him — the strike, the union, the mass movement — he met the fate this study has traced from the Peasants' Revolt to the Chartists: against an intact ruling order that held the courts, the law, and the force, popular energy from below was characteristically crushed. The great strikes of the late nineteenth century all ended the same way. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which spread across the country in the depths of a depression, was put down by state militias and federal troops, leaving scores dead. The Homestead strike of 1892, against Carnegie's steelworks, was broken after a pitched battle with Pinkerton guards and the arrival of the state militia. The Pullman strike of 1894 was crushed when the federal government, declaring that the boycott interfered with the mails, obtained a sweeping court injunction and sent in the army. The pattern was the same each time: the courts issued injunctions treating combinations of workers as criminal conspiracies while combinations of capital flourished unmolested, and the armed force of the state was turned on the strikers. The worker rising directly against the industrial order lost, as those below characteristically lose against an order still intact, because the order held all four of the things that decide such contests — the swords, the law, the administration, and enough of the formed belief of the country, which still largely held that property was sacred and the market's distribution natural and just. Nothing in this period was won by the strength of the rising. The rising was defeated. What changed the arrangement was a change in the calculation at the top.

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III. The Progressive Concession

What began to change it was not the workers' rising but a split within the ruling and professional classes themselves over how to manage an industrial order that was generating both enormous wealth and dangerous instability — and the fear, spreading among the propertied, that if the system's worst abuses were not reformed, something far more radical might sweep it away.

The Progressive movement of the early twentieth century was, in this reading, the ruling and professional classes reforming the industrial arrangement in order to save it. Faced with the visible miseries of unregulated industry, the periodic financial panics, the corruption of machine politics, and above all the rising threat of socialism and radical labour — which frightened the propertied with the prospect of a genuine upheaval from below — reformers from within the comfortable classes moved to clean up the worst abuses: to regulate the trusts, inspect the food and the drugs, limit the hours of labour, curb the corruption, and admit the common man to a somewhat larger voice through measures like the direct election of senators. These were real reforms, and they improved real lives. But their logic, in the main, was conservative in the deepest sense. They aimed to preserve the industrial capitalist order by reforming its excesses, to buy off the discontent that might otherwise turn revolutionary, and to give the system the legitimacy and stability it needed to endure. The reformers were saving the arrangement by improving it — conceding enough to the common man to keep him inside the system rather than against it. This is the pattern the framework expects: concession from above, driven by the ruling class's fear of something worse, delivering real gains to the common man as the byproduct of the ruling class's interest in its own preservation. The gains were genuine. They were also, in their motive, the arrangement protecting itself.

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IV. The Depression and the Great Fear

The Great Depression that began in 1929 was the deepest crisis the American arrangement had faced since the Civil War, and it produced the largest concession to the common man in the nation's history, by the same mechanism at a far higher intensity.

The collapse was total and terrifying: a quarter of the workforce thrown out of work, banks failing, farms foreclosed, the industrial economy seized up, millions destitute and hungry in the richest country on earth. And the crisis was not merely economic; it was a crisis of belief. The legitimating conviction that had held the industrial order — that the market's distribution was natural and just, that the man who failed had only himself to blame, that government had no business interfering with property and contract — could not survive the spectacle of a quarter of the willing workforce idled through no fault of its own. When the belief that holds an arrangement collapses, this study has shown, the arrangement is in its greatest danger, because the question of who shall rule and on what terms is forced back into the open. The propertied classes looked at the early 1930s — the breadlines, the farm revolts, the swelling audiences for the radical and demagogic movements of left and right, the example of revolution and

dictatorship abroad — and many genuinely feared that the American capitalist order might not survive, that it might go the way of the orders that had fallen in Europe.

It was in that fear that the New Deal was made, and the framework reads Franklin Roosevelt's achievement precisely in those terms: as the salvation of American capitalism by the concession of enough to the common man to restore his belief in the arrangement and pull him back from the radical alternatives. Roosevelt, himself a man of the patrician ruling class, understood — as the shrewdest members of a ruling class always understand — that the way to save the arrangement was not to resist all concession but to grant enough of it to buy the system's legitimacy back. The shape of the concession tracked the pressure exactly. The first improvisations were thrown together against the emergency; when the Supreme Court struck down the early industrial-recovery program in 1935 and the radical pressure kept rising — Huey Long's share-the-wealth movement, Father Coughlin's broadcasts, the general strikes that shut down Minneapolis and San Francisco and Toledo in 1934 — Roosevelt moved further, not because his convictions had changed but because his calculation of the minimum necessary concession had updated upward. The Second New Deal of 1935 was that larger concession. The Works Progress Administration, set up in April 1935, put some eight and a half million people to work over its life building the schools and bridges and post offices that still stand. The National Labor Relations Act — the Wagner Act, signed in July 1935 — gave industrial workers, for the first time in national law, the protected right to organise and bargain collectively, and created a board to enforce it; Roosevelt had not even backed the bill until labour's pressure made opposition costlier than support. Its passage set off an explosion of organising — the AFL itself reported "a virtual uprising of workers for union membership" — that built the industrial unions and the forty-four-day sit-down strike that brought General Motors to terms, and that drove union membership from about four million in 1935 to about fourteen million by 1945. And the Social Security Act, signed in August 1935, founded the American welfare state: old-age insurance, unemployment insurance, the first federal guarantee that a worker's last years and lost jobs need not mean destitution. Roosevelt insisted it be funded by a tax on workers' own wages, precisely so that the worker would feel he had paid for what he received and could not be stripped of it — so that, as he put it, with those taxes in the system "no damn politician can ever scrap my Social Security program." He was building the gain into a claim that later rulers would find loaded against them, and the claim has held: in ninety years no administration has dared abolish it. These were vast and real gains, the largest the American common man had ever received, and they bound a generation of working people to Roosevelt and to the arrangement he had saved.

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V. The Price: Writing the Exclusion In

And here the New Deal repeated the founding's pattern so exactly that the repetition is the framework's clearest second demonstration of how the common man's gains are bought by excluding some of the common men.

To pass his program, Roosevelt needed the votes of the southern Democrats, who through the seniority system chaired the key committees of a Congress their one-party South returned to office election after election. The southern ruling class held, in the national legislature, a veto over the New Deal — and it had a price. The price was the protection of the southern racial and labour order. The southern planters and employers depended on a cheap, controlled, largely black agricultural and domestic labour force, held in place by debt, custom, and the threat of violence in a South where the black worker had been stripped of the vote and the protection of the law since Reconstruction's betrayal. A federal welfare state and a federal labour law that reached the black field hand and the black domestic would have given that worker an alternative to the plantation and the kitchen — a pension, an unemployment cheque, the legal right to organise — and so would have loosened the southern ruling class's grip on its labour force and, with it, on the racial order that grip sustained. The southern Democrats would not allow it, and Roosevelt, needing their votes, did not force them.

So the great New Deal statutes were written with the black worker carved out. The Social Security Act excluded agricultural and domestic workers from its old-age and unemployment provisions — and agricultural and domestic work was the work of roughly sixty-five percent of black Americans at the time, and of the great mass of black workers in the South. The Wagner Act, granting the protected right to organise, excluded those same categories. The Fair Labor Standards Act, setting minimum wages and maximum hours, excluded them again. The men who set the price said so plainly in committee: Robert Doughton of North Carolina, chairing House Ways and Means, and Pat Harrison of Mississippi, chairing Senate Finance, made clear that southern support required that the new federal protections not reach the black southern labour force whose low wages were the foundation of the southern economy. And yet the exclusions were framed in the neutral, universal language of occupational categories — "agricultural labor," "domestic service" — that named no race at all, exactly as the Constitution's slavery clauses had protected slavery without naming it. Everyone involved understood what the categories meant. The carve-outs delivered the new security to the white industrial worker while withholding it from the black, and they did so in race-neutral words that let the founding-era evasion run again: the universal text covering a racial exclusion the text itself never had to name. The formation boundary of 1787 was redrawn in 1935 along the same line.

The framework marks, as its discipline requires, that the precise causes are debated among historians. The dominant account, associated with Ira Katznelson and others, holds that these exclusions were the deliberate price of southern Democratic support, demanded to protect the South's racial labour system — the New Deal "shaped to racist contours." Other scholars argue that genuine administrative difficulties in covering scattered farm and domestic workers, and the structure of a federal system that left much to the states, also played real parts, and that the racial motive, while present, was not the whole story. The framework does not need to resolve the dispute to make its structural point, which holds on any reading: the southern ruling class held a veto in Congress; the New Deal's benefits were distributed so as to protect the southern racial labour order by excluding the workers who were overwhelmingly black; and the exclusion was written in universal, race-neutral language. Whether by explicit racial design or by a

design that served racial ends while wearing other justifications, the second great bargain bought the consent of one faction of the ruling class by excluding the most vulnerable of the common men — exactly as the first great bargain, the Constitution itself, had been built on terms that protected slavery in unnamed clauses.

Hold both halves, because here the temptation to a one-sided reading is strongest. The gain was real and immense: the New Deal gave the American common man a security against the worst that had ever been provided in the country's history, transformed the position of industrial labour for decades, lifted millions of the old out of destitution, and prevented the recurrence of the worst financial abuses for two generations. To read it only as a racial bargain, and lose sight of how much real good it did for tens of millions of common people of every colour, would be as false to the history as to ignore the exclusion. And the exclusion was real, and structural, not incidental: the same laws that secured the white worker's new rights were written to withhold them from the black, deepening, at the very moment the welfare state was created, the gap between the white common man brought inside the new security and the black common man left outside it. The gain and the exclusion were not two acts but one — the new security and the carve-out written into the same statutes, by the same Congress, in the same race-neutral words.

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VI. The War, and the First Firing of the Dead Words

The Second World War closed the period and, in closing it, lit the first sparks of the firing the next part will trace, so it belongs here as the bridge.

The war did, almost overnight, what the New Deal's peacetime programs had not managed: it abolished the unemployment that had defined the decade. Some sixteen million Americans went into uniform; the rest went to work in the war plants; national output doubled in four years; and unemployment fell from around fourteen percent in 1940 to barely one percent by 1944. Real wages rose, the unions consolidated their wartime gains, and at the war's end the federal government extended to the returning soldier, through the GI Bill of 1944, a vast new provision — college tuition, home loans, unemployment pay — that built much of the postwar white middle class, sending some eight million veterans to school and underwriting some four million home loans within a decade.

But the GI Bill was administered, in the South, through the same machinery that had drawn the New Deal's other lines, so that black veterans were in many places routed away from the loans and the colleges that were transforming the lives of their white comrades-in-arms — the exclusion inscribed once more into the implementation rather than the words. And it was against exactly this — the contradiction of black men asked to fight and work for a democracy that denied them its benefits at home — that the dormant words of Reconstruction began, faintly, to fire. In 1941 the black labour leader A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened to bring a hundred thousand marchers to Washington to demand an end to discrimination in the booming defence industries.

To head off the march, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941, barring such discrimination by firms holding federal war contracts and creating a Fair Employment Practice Committee to police it. The committee was weak and Congress abolished it in 1946 — but the principle had been stated in the federal record for the first time since Reconstruction, that the national government could forbid racial discrimination in employment, and that principle would become the seed of the Civil Rights Act's employment provisions two decades on. The pattern was the founding's pattern exactly: organised pressure from below reached the point where concession was cheaper than refusal, and an elite calculation produced the minimum concession that the pressure required, calibrated to the threat and issued days before the march.

And the war itself put the loaded words into the hands of the people who would fire them. Some 1.2 million black Americans served in the armed forces, in segregated units under white officers, fighting a war proclaimed as a war for democracy and the Four Freedoms while living under a domestic order that denied them the vote and the equal protection of the law. The black press named the contradiction in a slogan — the Double V, victory against fascism abroad and victory against racism at home — that was the commitment trap stated as a campaign: the nation was fighting for the principles its founding documents proclaimed, and those principles, by their own terms, condemned the order at home. The men who came back from that war, having fought under the banner of equality, would not return quietly to the bottom of the fence. The words written in 1868 and emptied of force for a lifetime were being taken up again. What they still lacked was an alignment at the top that would make the firing pay — and that, the next part shows, a new global contest was about to supply.

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VII. What This Part Establishes

Across the industrial age and its two great crises, the ruling class conceded real and large gains to the common man — the Progressive reforms, and then the far greater gains of the New Deal — and it conceded them, characteristically, not because the common man rose and took them, for when he rose directly he was crushed as he had always been, but because a frightened ruling class judged that conceding enough to restore the common man's belief in the arrangement was the cheapest way to save the arrangement from the upheaval it feared. The gains were the arrangement protecting itself by improving itself, delivered from above out of the ruling class's interest in its own survival.

And the largest of these concessions, the New Deal, repeated the founding's deepest pattern. It bought the consent of the southern ruling class, which held a veto in Congress, by writing that class's price into the law: the exclusion of the black agricultural and domestic worker from the new security, framed in the universal, race-neutral language of occupational categories that named no race while delivering a racial result, exactly as the Constitution had protected slavery in clauses that never used the word. The white common man was brought inside the new welfare state; the black common man was, in large part, left outside it; and the two were a single act, written in the same statutes.

Hold both spines, at the summit of the common man's gains. The gains were real: the New Deal genuinely transformed the security of tens of millions and saved a generation from the worst of the Depression. And they were contingent and bought on terms of exclusion: delivered by a ruling class to save itself, distributed so as to protect the southern racial order, written to include some of the common men by excluding others. There is no march of progress here either — only a frightened ruling class conceding what it had to in order to endure, on the terms its own internal bargaining required, in the universal language that covered the exclusion as it had always covered it. The gains rested, as ever, on an alignment of interests — the ruling class's fear, the worker's leverage in a mass-mobilisation economy, the coalition that held North and South together inside one party — and that alignment, like every alignment in this study, would shift.

The next part watches it shift, and watches the long-dead words of Reconstruction fired at last. After the Second World War, the position of the American ruling class in the Cold War contest for the loyalty of a decolonising world changed enough that the Reconstruction amendments, written in 1868 and emptied of force for a century, could finally be enforced — turned, by a movement that seized them and a ruling class that now had a reason to back them, into the legal demolition of segregation. Real gains followed, and Harlan's lone dissent at last became the law. And then, by the now-familiar mechanism, a long restructuring would begin to hollow them out again while leaving the words in place — the reversibility spine demonstrated, as the study promised, a second time.

PART VI

THE WORDS FIRED AGAIN

How the Cold War contest for the loyalty of the world shifted the ruling class's position enough to fire the long-dead Reconstruction words at last, how real gains followed, and how a long restructuring hollowed them out again while leaving the words in place, 1945–2008

A Note on Method and Intent

This part shows the reversibility spine demonstrated a second time, which is why the study insists on it: a single instance might be an accident, but the same motion twice, on the same words, a century apart, is a pattern. The words written into the Constitution in 1868 and emptied of force for a century are fired at last — turned, by a movement that seized them and a ruling class whose position in a new global contest finally gave it reason to enforce them, into the legal demolition of segregation. The gains are real and large. And then, by the now-familiar mechanism, a long restructuring hollows much of the achievement out again while the words stay in the law.

The argument is structural and uses the language of tendency. It does not claim the civil-rights movement was anything other than heroic and sincere; the courage and the moral force of the people who marched were real, and the framework honours them without reservation. Its claim is the colder structural one beside that courage: that the movement succeeded *when* it did because the ruling class's interest had shifted to make success useful to it, and that the same gains, resting on that shifted interest, eroded when the interest moved again. It takes the suffering and the courage with full seriousness, and it sets aside as unknowable the private hearts of the powerful who acted. What it reads is the structure of why the words fired when they fired, and why their force drained again.

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I. Where the Last Part Left Off

The New Deal had repeated the founding's pattern: it conceded real and large gains to the common man to save the arrangement from the Depression's threat, and it bought the southern ruling class's consent by writing that class's price — the exclusion of the black agricultural and domestic worker — into the universal, race-neutral language of the new welfare state. The white common man was brought inside the new security; the black common man was, in large part, left outside it. And behind that exclusion stood the older one, still in force: since the betrayal of Reconstruction, the black southerner had been

stripped of the vote, segregated by law, and held in a bondage-in-fact, while the words of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments sat in the Constitution, fired to their height in 1868 and emptied of force for a century, a dead letter waiting in the venerated text.

This part is about how those dead words came alive again. The claim is precise and, on its face, hard: that the long-dead Reconstruction amendments were fired at last not principally because the nation's conscience awoke, though many consciences did awake, but because the position of the American ruling class in a new global contest shifted enough to give it, for the first time since 1877, a positive interest in enforcing them. The thing to watch is the same two-motion pattern as the pivot — the firing, and then the partial withdrawal — running now a second time, on the same words, confirming that the mechanism is a pattern and not an accident.

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II. The Shifted Position: Why the Words Could Fire

The Second World War left the United States the dominant power of half the world and locked it into a global contest with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of everyone else — and that contest is what changed the ruling class's interest in the race question, after a century in which its interest had been to leave the South alone.

The contest was, above all, a contest for belief. Each superpower claimed to offer the better way of life, the more just society, the future the world's peoples should choose. And the great prize was the enormous population of the decolonising world — the nations of Africa and Asia emerging from European empire, predominantly non-white, sharp by their own colonial experience to the meaning of racial hierarchy, and courted by both superpowers. In that contest, American racial segregation was a catastrophic liability. The spectacle of black Americans denied the vote, segregated by law, beaten for demanding their rights, and lynched with impunity — broadcast to the world and amplified by a Soviet propaganda that asked the decolonising peoples how they could trust a self-proclaimed leader of the free world that treated its own dark-skinned citizens so — undercut the entire American claim at exactly the point where it was being contested. The propaganda worked because it was accurate: American segregation was exactly what it was said to be, and the watching world could see it. An arrangement runs on belief, this study has shown, and a ruling class must manage the belief that legitimates it; here the belief that legitimated American power on the world stage was being destroyed, in the eyes of the audience that mattered most, by the visible facts of American segregation.

This is what shifted the ruling class's position, and the shift is documented in the government's own hand. When the Justice Department filed its brief urging the Supreme Court to strike down school segregation, the brief — filed in December 1952 under the Truman administration — devoted five of its seven pages of argument to foreign policy. Racial discrimination, it warned, "furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills" and raised doubts even among friendly nations about the depth of

American devotion to the democratic faith; segregation had been singled out for hostile foreign comment whose effect on American foreign relations was, the brief said, growing in alarming proportions. It quoted a letter from Secretary of State Dean Acheson that race discrimination at home "remains a source of constant embarrassment to this Government" in the daily conduct of its foreign relations and jeopardised its claim to lead the free nations of the world. This was not the language of conscience awakened; it was the language of a strategic liability to be removed — the same calculation that had already moved Truman to desegregate the armed forces by executive order in 1948, the segregated military having become an embarrassment in the same global contest. The federal executive had come, for the first time in three generations, to see segregation as a wound in the nation's position, and therefore to have a ruling-class interest in ending it. Historians have named this the convergence of interests: the black American's long-standing claim to equality advanced, as it had not before, precisely when it converged with the ruling class's new interest in removing a liability that was costing it the global contest. The words of the Fourteenth Amendment had waited in the Constitution for a century. What let them fire at last was that the people with the power to enforce them now had a reason to.

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III. The Firing: The Words Made Law Again

What followed was the second great firing of the founders' words, and the framework honours the movement that seized the moment even as it reads the structure that made the moment available.

Two things had to be in place at once, and both were. The first was a legal vehicle prepared to deliver the firing through a channel the constitutional order would accept. The lawyers of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund — first Charles Hamilton Houston, then his student Thurgood Marshall — had been building it since the 1930s, with a patient strategy that chipped away at Plessy's "separate but equal" rule case by case: *Gaines v. Canada* in 1938, forcing Missouri to provide a black student the legal education it gave white ones; *Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* in 1950, holding that hastily improvised and degrading black facilities could not be equal — each a small firing of the Fourteenth Amendment at a level the Court could accept, building the record that made the direct challenge possible. The second was the popular movement that forced the contradiction into the open and would not let it be ignored: the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, the Greensboro sit-ins of 1960, the Freedom Rides of 1961, the Birmingham demonstrations of 1963, the March on Washington that August, the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, the Selma voting marches of 1965. The people who carried these campaigns risked and often gave their lives; they were not calculating ruling-class interest, they were demanding their rights, and their moral force was real and was part of what moved the country.

The framework holds both facts without collapsing either. The movement's pressure was necessary, and the ruling class's shifted Cold War calculation was the mechanism that let the pressure produce structural change rather than being crushed as every earlier rising had been crushed. And the two worked through a single channel: the movement was disciplined enough to provoke the segregationist violence — Bull

Connor's fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, the troopers' clubs on the Selma bridge — onto the television screens of the nation and the front pages of the foreign press, so that the violence struck exactly the two audiences whose belief the ruling class needed, the northern white voter whose democratic creed the images contradicted and the watching world whose allegiance was the Cold War prize. When President Kennedy went on television in June 1963 to call for a civil-rights law, he told the country it faced "a moral crisis as a country and a people" and that it could not preach freedom around the globe while denying it at home — the moral appeal and the strategic calculation stated in the same breath, which is the framework's whole point.

And then the words were made law. The Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education* on 17 May 1954, struck down the school segregation its predecessors had blessed — Chief Justice Earl Warren marshalling a unanimous court, nine to nothing, to hold that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and violated the equal protection of the laws. Harlan's lone dissent of 1896, that the Constitution is colour-blind and tolerates no classes among citizens, was the loaded word fired at last, fifty-eight years after he wrote it, now as the law of the land. The Congress followed, once the movement's pressure and a sympathetic shift in national politics — and Lyndon Johnson's mastery of a Senate his party held by a vast margin after 1964 — made passage possible. The Civil Rights Act of 2 July 1964 outlawed discrimination in employment and public accommodations on grounds of race, colour, religion, national origin — and sex. The Voting Rights Act of 6 August 1965 put federal power behind the Fifteenth Amendment's century-old guarantee, banning the literacy tests and poll taxes and grandfather clauses and white primaries by which the South had disenfranchised black voters, and — crucially — installing in its Section 5 a preclearance machinery that required the covered states to get federal approval before changing their voting rules, an automatic federal check of exactly the kind the first Reconstruction had lacked. The Fair Housing Act followed in 1968. The dead words came alive: the black southerner voted again in numbers not seen since the brief years after the war; legal segregation was dismantled; and the apparatus of caste built after 1877 was, in its formal legal structure, demolished. The gain was real, and it was vast — the largest advance in the legal position of black Americans since the war amendments themselves, a century before.

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IV. The Gain, and What It Reached

The framework holds the reality and the size of the gain firmly, because the second firing, like the first, delivered genuine and lasting changes that no structural reading should minimise.

Legal segregation, the formal apparatus of Jim Crow, was ended and did not return. The black vote in the South, once restored by federal enforcement, became a permanent and powerful fact of American politics, electing black officials across a region where none had held office within living memory and forcing the white politicians who remained to reckon with black voters. A black middle class, long present but constrained, expanded as the legal barriers to employment and education fell. The formal

legal equality the Fourteenth Amendment had promised in 1868 became, after 1965, a reality in law in a way it had never been — the words enforced, the caste system that had nullified them dismantled. These were not paper gains. They reshaped American life, and the generation that won them changed the country permanently in important respects. The words had been fired, and this time, with force behind them, they struck home.

And the universal language, once fired, travelled as it always does. The Civil Rights Act's prohibition of discrimination, written in the universal terms the binding language required, reached beyond race: it forbade discrimination in employment on grounds of sex as well — a provision whose origins were tangled but whose words, once in the statute, became in the decades that followed a principal legal instrument of the movement for women's equality, and later still of other excluded groups who took the same words down off the shelf and fired them at their own exclusions. This is the mechanism running exactly true to form: words written to remedy one exclusion, framed in the universal language that alone could make them binding, escaping their immediate occasion and arming claims their authors had not been thinking of. The words outran their authors a second time, in a second century, just as Locke's and Jefferson's had.

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V. The Withdrawal: The Long Restructuring

And then, by the now-familiar mechanism, the force behind the words drained again — not all at once and not by repealing them, for the words and the formal legal victories stayed in place, but through a long restructuring that hollowed out much of what the firing had promised while leaving its formal achievements standing.

The reversal worked along several channels at once, and the framework reads them together as the arrangement's interest shifting once more. The political coalition that had carried the civil-rights legislation broke apart, as a politics organised partly around racial backlash drew away the white working- and middle-class voters who had been the heart of the New Deal coalition, and the national commitment to enforcing and extending the gains weakened. The economic ground shifted under the very communities the legal victories had freed: just as the legal barriers fell, the industrial jobs that might have carried black workers into security drained out of the cities through deindustrialisation and the movement of work overseas, so that formal access arrived in cities being emptied of the work that would have made it mean something. And a new apparatus of control grew up where the old one had been dismantled — a vast expansion of policing and imprisonment that fell with crushing disproportion on black Americans, confining a substantial share of a generation of black men and, through the felony disenfranchisement that follows conviction in most states, stripping many of them of the very vote the Voting Rights Act had restored. The formal right to vote stood untouched in the law; a system that removed millions from the rolls by another route grew up beside it.

The reading of this is the same as the reading of the first withdrawal, and the parallel is the point. The words were not repealed; Brown still stands, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts still stand, legal segregation is still gone. But the force and the resources and the political will that had briefly stood behind the promise of substantive equality drained away as the ruling class's interest shifted — as the Cold War wound down and removed the foreign-policy imperative that had helped fire the words, as the political advantage came to lie in managing racial division rather than resolving it, and as the economy restructured in ways that left the formally freed without the material ground their formal freedom needed to stand on. Even the Voting Rights Act's automatic preclearance — the one enforcement machinery the first Reconstruction had lacked — would in time be read out of operation by a Court that judged its conditions no longer to apply, leaving the guarantee on the page and the mechanism that made it bite removed. What was left was the now-recognisable American pattern: the universal words secure in the law, the formal victories intact and genuinely irreversible in their own terms, and beneath them a lived reality in which much of the substantive promise had been hollowed out — the gain delivered and then, in large part, withdrawn by a restructuring that never had to touch the words at all.

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VI. Why the Same Pattern Twice Matters

The framework dwells on the doubling because a pattern that runs twice on the same words, a century apart, establishes something a single instance never could.

The first time — the war amendments fired in 1868 and hollowed out after 1877 — might be read as a tragic accident, a noble effort defeated by the particular villainy of the Redeemers and the particular weakness of a war-weary North. The second time forecloses that comfort. The same words, fired again in the 1950s and 1960s with all the moral force of a heroic movement behind them, backed this time by the full power of the federal government and a sympathetic national mood, were again hollowed out within a generation by a restructuring that left the words in place. Two firings, two partial withdrawals, on the same constitutional language, separated by a hundred years. That is not an accident. It is the mechanism this study has traced from the Norman Conquest forward, showing its character plainly: the common man's gains are real when the force of an interested ruling class stands behind them, and they erode when that interest shifts, and the words remain in the venerated record throughout, alive or dead according to whether anyone with power has reason to enforce them.

The doubling also shows the contingency from the other side, which the framework is careful to hold. The words fired both times because the ruling class's position shifted both times to make firing them useful — in 1868, the northern ruling class's war with the slave power; in the 1950s, the Cold War contest for the decolonising world. Neither shift was guaranteed, and neither was permanent. Had there been no Cold War, no global contest for belief in which segregation was a crippling liability, the dead words might have waited far longer for a ruling-class interest to fire them — the movement's courage notwithstanding, because courage from below, this study has shown again and again, does not by itself

move an intact order. The words came alive when an interest aligned to bring force behind them, and the substance faded when the interest moved on. There is no arrow here, no march toward justice built into the structure of time; there is only the blind mechanism, firing the loaded words wherever a shifted interest happens to point them, and ceasing to enforce them when the interest points elsewhere.

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VII. What This Part Establishes

The long-dead Reconstruction words were fired a second time, a century after they were written, because the position of the American ruling class in the Cold War contest for the loyalty of the decolonising world shifted enough to give it, for the first time since 1877, an interest in enforcing them — and a heroic movement seized that moment to take the universal words down from the venerated record and fire them at the caste system the powerful had built. The gains were real and vast: legal segregation demolished and not restored, the black vote restored by federal force and made a permanent fact, the formal equality the Fourteenth Amendment had promised in 1868 made real in law at last, and the universal language travelling on, as it always does, to arm the claims of women and others who took the same words down for their own exclusions.

And then the force behind the words drained again, through a long restructuring that hollowed out much of the substantive promise while leaving every formal victory standing — a broken political coalition, an economy that pulled the industrial ground out from under the newly freed, and a vast apparatus of policing and imprisonment that stripped many of the very vote the law had restored. The words stayed in the law, alive and irreversible in their own formal terms; the lived reality beneath them was, in large part, emptied out, the gain delivered and then withdrawn by a restructuring that never touched the words.

Hold both spines, and hold the doubling. The gains of the civil-rights era were real, the courage that won them was real, and the formal victories endure. And the gains rested, as every gain in this study rests, on an alignment of ruling-class interest that had shifted to make them useful and would shift again to let them fade — and the proof that this is a pattern and not an accident is that it happened twice, on the same words, a century apart. The mechanism is blind and holds no brief for progress; it fired the words of equality when an interested power had reason to fire them and let their force drain when the reason passed, exactly as it had a hundred years before. That is the second demonstration the study promised.

The final part turns to the live case: the years since the turn of the century, in which the long hollowing-out, the strains of a restructured economy, and the fracturing of the old political order have brought the American arrangement to an unsettled and dangerous present. It is traced not to predict its outcome, which no one can, but to make the mechanism visible in events still underway — and to state, at the end, the soberest and least romantic case for what four centuries of ruling-class quarrels, fired words, and

contingent bargains have, for all the suffering and all the reversals, nonetheless left standing in the common man's hands: real, better than the alternatives, and losable.

PART VII

THE LIVE CASE

The unsettled present — how the long hollowing, the strains of a restructured economy, and the fracturing of the old political order have brought the American arrangement to a crisis whose outcome is not decided, and the unromantic defense of what four centuries of quarrels and fired words left standing, 2008–2026

A Note on Method and Intent

This final part turns to the living present, and it must be read differently from the six that precede it. Those traced patterns whose outcomes are settled and can be seen whole. This one enters a contest still underway, whose result no one knows and this study does not pretend to predict. Its purpose is not prophecy but visibility: to show the same mechanism the whole series has traced still operating in events the reader is living through, so that the present becomes legible as the latest working-out of a very old machine rather than as an unprecedented rupture.

The argument remains structural and uses the language of tendency, and it holds harder than ever to political even-handedness, because the present is where the temptation to partisanship is strongest and where yielding to it would destroy the analysis. It names no current figure as hero or villain and predicts no outcome. The facts of the moment it reports are reported as facts, drawn from the public record as it stands in the spring of 2026, not as a brief for any side. It closes, as the whole work has pointed toward closing, on the soberest possible statement of what the four centuries leave in the common man's hands — not a triumph, not a destiny, but a set of constraints on the powerful that are real, that are better than the alternatives, and that can be lost.

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I. Where the Series Has Arrived

The study has traced, across four centuries, a single mechanism. Three ruling classes of transplanted Englishmen, each governing its own arrangement, converged under external pressure and broke from Britain as Englishmen claiming an English inheritance. They wrote a treaty among themselves, the Constitution, and into it and the Declaration they put universal words they meant narrowly and could not keep narrow. Those words were fired, across the centuries that followed, by the excluded who took them down from the venerated record — fired against slavery and answered by civil war, fired into the Constitution itself in the war amendments and then hollowed out when the ruling class's interest shifted,

fired again in the civil-rights era when the Cold War gave the ruling class a new reason to enforce them, and hollowed out a second time by a long restructuring that left the words in place. Twice the common man's gains were delivered real and twice, in large part, withdrawn — the reversibility spine demonstrated, and demonstrated again.

This part asks where that mechanism stands now, in the years the reader is living through. The answer is that the long second hollowing-out, and the strains it has produced, have brought the arrangement to a crisis — a moment when the alignment of interests that held the postwar order together has come apart, when the belief that legitimated the arrangement has weakened across the population, and when the question of who shall rule and on what terms is more open than it has been in generations. What follows is an attempt to see that crisis through the lens the whole series has ground, without pretending to know how it ends.

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II. The Strains Beneath the Crisis

The crisis of the present rests on strains that have been building since the long restructuring began, and the framework reads them as the postwar alignment of interests coming apart.

The postwar decades, like the high postwar decades in Britain, were a period in which the interests of the American ruling class and a broad mass of the common people happened to align: a growing industrial economy needed workers and rewarded them, a Cold War competition for belief gave the ruling class reason to deliver broad prosperity and to fire the words of equality, and a wide middle class, disproportionately white, enjoyed a security and a rising standard of living without close precedent. That alignment has eroded. The industrial economy that sustained the broad middle was restructured by automation and by the movement of work across the world, hollowing out the secure industrial employment that had carried millions into the middle class. The gains of the economy since the restructuring have flowed overwhelmingly to the top, concentrating wealth at a height not seen since before the New Deal, while the security of the common man — in work, in health care, in the prospect that his children will live better than he did — has weakened. The belief that the arrangement delivers for ordinary people, which is the belief that legitimates it, has frayed accordingly.

When the belief that an arrangement serves the common man weakens, this study has shown, the arrangement enters its danger, because the consent that holds it cheaply is withdrawn and the question of who it really serves is forced back open. That is the deep condition of the present crisis: a large part of the population no longer experiences the arrangement as serving it, no longer extends the easy belief that held the postwar order, and has become available to political movements that name the arrangement itself as the problem. The financial collapse of 2008, which devastated ordinary households while the institutions that caused it were rescued, was a hinge in this loss of belief — a vivid demonstration, to

millions, that the arrangement protected the powerful and let the common man bear the cost, which is exactly the perception that dissolves the legitimating belief.

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III. The Fracturing of the Old Order

Out of that loss of belief has come the fracturing of the political order that governed the postwar decades, and the framework reads the convulsions of the present as the visible form of that fracture.

The two-party system that managed American politics for generations rested on coalitions assembled in and after the New Deal — coalitions that the long restructuring has broken and rearranged. The white working- and middle-class voters who were the heart of the postwar order, their economic security eroded and their belief in the arrangement weakened, have moved in large numbers toward a politics that names elites and outsiders as the authors of their decline. The old establishments of both parties have lost their grip on their own coalitions. And a politics of grievance and disruption, drawing on the genuine fact that the arrangement has stopped delivering for many, has risen to challenge the institutions and the norms of the postwar order itself. The framework does not read this as a uniquely wicked development or a uniquely virtuous one; it reads it as what characteristically happens when an arrangement loses the belief that legitimated it, and a population that no longer feels served becomes available to movements that promise to tear down or remake the order.

The present moment, as this is written in the spring of 2026, shows the fracture vividly, and the public record of it can be stated plainly without taking a side. A president returned to power in the election of 2024 on the strength of economic discontent now governs, in his second term, with the approval of well under half the country — his job-approval rating sitting in the mid-to-high thirties across the major national polls in May 2026, at or near the lowest of either of his terms, with disapproval near sixty percent. The decline is led, in the polling, by the economy and above all by prices: his central economic policy, the sweeping tariffs imposed across 2025, is widely associated by voters with the rising cost of living, and his standing on inflation is by a wide margin his weakest issue, even as growth has slowed and prices have continued to climb. Abroad, the country is engaged in unresolved military action — a strike that captured the leader of Venezuela early in 2026, and coordinated strikes on Iran begun that February that remained without clear resolution months later — that has added to the unsettled mood without restoring his standing. Majorities tell pollsters the country is on the wrong track and that the arrangement has made their lives more expensive rather than less; a clear majority say the country is going badly and needs major, disruptive change. Both major parties are distrusted by large shares even of their own voters, and a midterm election approaches with the party out of power favored. The institutions of the postwar order — the courts, the agencies, the norms governing the separation of powers — are under a pressure and a contestation sharper than in living memory, with serious observers disagreeing over whether the strains amount to a constitutional crisis or to the system's checks working as designed under stress. The framework offers no verdict on these disputes and no prediction of their

outcome. It observes only that the pattern is the one it has traced: the belief weakened, the alignment broken, the order fractured, and the question of who shall rule and on what terms forced back into the open in a way it has not been for generations.

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IV. The Mechanism Still Runs

What the framework can say about the present, without predicting it, is that the same mechanism the series has traced is visibly still running, and that naming its parts makes the present legible.

The universal words are still in the venerated record, and they are still being fired. Every faction in the present contest reaches for the founding language — the Constitution, the Declaration, the rights of the people, the very words the framers wrote narrowly and could not keep narrow — and claims it as its own warrant, exactly as every faction has done since 1776. The disputes that reach the courts are, in large part, fights over what the founding words require, fought by each side in the universal language that remains the only binding currency. The words are doing in 2026 what they have done for two and a half centuries: serving as the fixed material from which contending interests draw their warrants, firing in directions their authors never intended, claimed by all and owned by none.

The ruling class is still fractured, and the change still comes from that fracture rather than from the common man rising. The present upheaval is not the common man overthrowing an intact order; it is, in the framework's reading, a fight among elites and factions for control of an order whose legitimating belief has weakened — a contest in which the discontent of the common man is the force that various factions seek to harness, name, and direct, exactly as factions have harnessed popular discontent throughout the series. This is the discipline the study has kept from its first page, applied to the present: when the arrangement opens or closes, it does so because the calculation of the men at the top has changed, and the energy of the people below is the thing they steer, not the thing that steers. And the floor beneath the belief is still there: the institutions that constrain power hold, in the end, only so long as enough of the powerful and enough of the population continue to believe in them and act on that belief, because the constraints are not self-enforcing — they are, as Douglass said of the freedman's rights, only as real as the force and the will behind them. That is why the present is genuinely open. The constraints that four centuries left standing are real, but they rest, as everything in this study rests, on a belief and an alignment of interests that can hold or can fail.

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V. Why the Common Man's Gains Are Reversible — Stated Plainly

Before the defense, the framework states its hardest conclusion plainly, because the present is where it matters most and where the comforting alternative is most seductive.

There is no law of progress in this history. The study has shown the common man's gains delivered and withdrawn twice on the same words within the span it covers, and delivered and withdrawn across the longer English story that precedes it. The gains were never the unfolding of a destiny, never the arc of a universe bending toward justice, never a ratchet that could turn only one way. They were, every time, the contingent product of an alignment of interests that happened to make the gain serve someone with the power to deliver it — and they eroded, every time, when that alignment shifted. The franchise, the protections of the person, the rule of law, the constraints on the powerful: none of these is guaranteed by any force in history. They exist because, at particular moments, particular factions found it in their interest to write them and to enforce them, and they persist only so long as enough interest and enough belief continue to stand behind them. What was won by the alignment of interests can be lost when the interests realign.

This is not pessimism; it is the removal of a false comfort. The belief that progress is guaranteed is itself a danger, because it persuades people that the constraints will hold themselves, that no one need defend them, that the arrow of history will do the work — and a constraint that no one defends is a constraint already half lost. Every gain this study has traced wears, on close inspection, the same two marks: it was real, and it was written — set down by particular men for particular purposes, not handed down by nature or guaranteed by time. A thing that was written by an interested hand can be unwritten, or left unenforced, by another. That is the whole of the lesson, and the present is where it must be held most firmly, because the present is undecided and the holding of it is part of what will decide it.

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VI. The Unromantic Defense

And yet the framework ends not in despair and not in indifference but in defense, and the defense is the more serious for being unromantic — for resting on no illusion about how the constraints came to be or how secure they are.

What four centuries of ruling-class quarrels, fired words, and contingent bargains left in the common man's hands is a set of constraints on the powerful that are, for all their accidental origin and all their fragility, genuinely valuable and genuinely better than the alternatives. The vote, however it came, gives the common man a real if limited check on those who govern him. The rule of law, however self-interestedly the barons and the merchants first wrote it, means that power must answer to something outside itself, that the ruler is not simply free to do as he likes, that the person has protections he can invoke against the state. The independent court, the free press, the right to organize and to speak and to petition, the whole apparatus of constraint that the series has watched accumulate as the unintended inheritance of words written for other purposes — these are real limits on the powerful, and the difference between living under them and living without them is the difference between a better arrangement and a worse one, which is the only difference that was ever available to be made.

The framework's defense of these constraints rests on exactly the structural understanding the series has built, and this is its final and most important point. Because the constraints rest on no law of progress, they will not defend themselves. Because they were won by the alignment of interests and not by destiny, they can be lost when the interests realign, and the present is a moment when the interests are realigning and the belief that holds the constraints has weakened. Because the common man's gains have always been contingent and reversible, the only thing that keeps them is that enough people understand their value and act to defend them — not in the faith that history guarantees them, which it does not, but in the clear-eyed knowledge that they are good, that they are better than what came before and better than what would replace them, and that they are losable. The watchfulness the whole work points toward is this: not the complacent watchfulness of those who believe the arrangement will hold itself, but the vigilant watchfulness of those who understand that it will not. The constraints on power that four centuries left standing are the most valuable thing the common man possesses; they were built by no one for his benefit; they rest on nothing but the continuing alignment of interests and belief that sustains them; and they will last exactly as long as enough people see them clearly enough to defend them — and not one moment longer.

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VII. What the Whole Study Establishes

The America series has traced the same mechanism as its English companion, in a sharper and faster form, on the other side of the Atlantic. Several ruling classes of transplanted Englishmen, each governing its own arrangement of belief and force, converged under pressure and broke from Britain claiming an English inheritance; they wrote a treaty among themselves in universal words they meant narrowly; and those words, lodged in a venerated record and held nearly sacred, outran their authors and were fired across the centuries by the excluded, in directions the founders had built the documents to prevent. The common man's gains came not from his rising, which was crushed when he rose against an intact order, but from the ruling class fracturing and from the universal words being fired when a shifted interest gave some faction reason to fire them. And those gains were delivered real and withdrawn in part, twice over on the same words, proving the reversibility spine the study set out to demonstrate.

Hold both spines a final time, because the whole work has been built to hold them. The common man's gains in America were real — the franchise, the protections of the person, the demolition of legal slavery and then of legal segregation, the security of the New Deal, the whole accumulated inheritance of constraint on the powerful — and they were no illusion, no mere mystification, but genuine goods that genuinely improved real lives. And they were unintended and contingent and reversible — the byproducts of elite quarrels rather than gifts from above or prizes seized from below, resting on no law of progress but only on the alignment of interests that delivered them, and demonstrated, twice within the study's span, to be losable when that alignment shifts. The mechanism that produced them is blind: it fired the words of equality wherever a shifted interest happened to point them, and it would as readily

have confirmed subjection had the words written down sanctified the order rather than limiting it. There is no destination here that history was bound to reach, and there is none it is bound to reach now.

That is why the study ends where it does, on the live and undecided present, with its defense of the constraints stated in the soberest terms it can find. The arrangement is in crisis; the belief that held it has weakened; the alignment that delivered the common man's gains has come apart; and the question of who shall rule and on what terms is open in a way it has not been for generations. No one knows how it resolves. But the framework's whole work bears on how its readers might stand within it: not in the false comfort that progress is guaranteed, and not in the corrosive cynicism that, seeing the constraints were never built for the common man's benefit, concludes they are worthless and not worth defending — but in the clear structural understanding that the constraints on power are real, that they are better than the alternatives, that they were won by accident and rest on nothing but continuing belief and interest, and that they will be kept only by those who see them clearly enough to defend them, in the knowledge that they can be lost. The words were written. Where they are fired next, and whether the constraints they built will hold, is not yet decided — and it will be decided, as it always has been, by who understands the machine and who is willing to act on what they see.